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By Resa Nelson

Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow blazes a new trail in filmmaking.

Three decades ago, George Lucas sparked an evolution in filmmaking by reinventing the past. It began with his boyhood love of serials.

In the 1930s and 1940s, serials were short films shown before a feature. The idea was to have an ongoing storyline broken up into a series of short films released every week or so in movie theaters. Each installment of a serial was jam-packed with action and adventure and ended with a cliffhanger—a "to be continued" approach that kept audiences coming back for more.

Lucas tapped into the sensibility of these serials and transfused it into contemporary feature films.

The result? In the 1970s, fans waited anxiously for each installment of the first *Star Wars* movies. In the 1980s, Lucas teamed with Steven Spielberg to bring another flavor of serials to modern audiences: the Indiana Jones movies.

Lucas may be the master of serial-inspired movie-making, but there's a new kid in town. His name is Sky Captain.

Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow is scheduled for release on September 17 by Paramount Pictures. Set in 1939, the movie is a blend of action, science fiction, adventure, comedy, and romance. It's an alternate history in which the world suddenly comes under attack by mechanical monsters. Towering robots march through city streets, shoulder to shoulder with skyscrapers. Ace pilot Sky Captain (Jude Law of *A.I., Cold Mountain*) is enlisted to fight back, while reporter Polly Perkins (Gwyneth Paltrow of *Shakespeare in Love, Shallow Hal*) investigates the disappearance of the world's most important scientists.

Jude Law leads the attack on a horde of mechanical robots bent on Earth's destruction in Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow.

Sky Captain and Polly are no strangers. They once were in love, only to have a bad falling out. Sky Captain accused Polly of sabotaging his plane, while Polly had reason to believe he cheated on her.

About Polly, producer Marsha Oglesby (*The Rules of Attraction*, TV's *Boomtown*) says, "She's very strong-willed and very intent on getting the story. In a lot of ways, she reminds me of Katharine Hepburn in those old movies with Spencer Tracy—she's very outspoken and determined and driven. She's a very interesting character."

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While many modern films blend CGI technology with traditional methods of filmmaking, Sky Captain *is the first film to boast sets created entirely with computer graphics. RIGHT: Jolie's Franky Cook is a force to be reckoned with.*

Enter Franky Cook (Angelina Jolie of *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider, Taking Lives*), a tough naval aviator who commands a fleet of female amphibious pilots. She also has a history with Sky Captain. When the two women meet, Polly suspects Franky of being the woman who lured him away.

"We're not exactly sure what happened," says Jolie about the relationship between Franky and Sky Captain. "We don't know whether they were madly in love or whether they nearly killed each other."

While Sky Captain is a dashing hero cut from the same cloth as Indiana Jones, Polly has sass and moxie, as well as a keen sense of fashion. Franky, sporting a sexy leather eyepatch, is strong and ready for action. The two women come across as yin and yang, dark and light.

"They play off each other well," Oglesby says.

The plot thickens with the appearance of the Mysterious Woman (Bai Ling of *Wild Wild West, Anna and the King*), the right-hand woman of Dr. Totenkopf, an evil mastermind who's intent on destroying the world. Slim and petite, the Mysterious Woman is a fierce martial artist who fights Sky Captain at every possible opportunity. Even worse, she kidnaps Dex (Giovanni Ribisi of *Boiler Room, The Gift*), Sky Captain's Boy Friday. A mad chase to rescue Dex and stop Dr. Totenkopf's evil plot takes Sky Captain and Polly to exotic locations around the globe.

"It has all the elements of really classic 1930s, 1940s films: heroism and mystery," Jolie says. "But it also has this amazing modern edge to it."

On one hand, the movie has the feel of an old-fashioned black-and-white film that's been colorized. And yet, the images of 1939 are unlike anything that's ever been seen on screen before.

While movie franchises like *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars* include an enormous number of CGI and other effects, they blend those effects with traditional movie-making techniques. For example, the production for the *Lord of the Rings* movies included an enormous amount of detail work in designing and creating sets and props. Take Hobbitton, it was a real outdoor set. A year before the movie began shooting, set designers sculpted Hobbitton from a patch of the New Zealand countryside. In addition to creating the Hobbit homes, they shaped the landscape by

There's plenty more to choose from this fall. Keep your eyes open for these fantasy and horror films:

FALL 2004 MOVIE PREVIEW

August 27—*Warriors of Heaven and Earth* (Columbia/Sony) follows in the footsteps of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Plenty of swordplay punctuates this story, set during China's Tang Dynasty. Lai Qi is a Japanese emissary who has served the Chinese emperor for decades—all he wants is to go home. Lieutenant Li is a fugitive because he instigated a mutiny after refusing orders to kill women and children. Qi's only way back to Japan is to capture the renegade Li. They end up in a caravan traveling through the western territories. Among the travelers is a monk carrying a sacred and powerful relic. When the caravan is threatened by bandits and a powerful overlord, Qi and Li join forces to protect the travelers, the monk, and his precious cargo.

Milla Jovovich

Warriors

August 27—*Anacondas: The Hunt for the Blood Orchid* (Screen Gems/Sony) is a sequel to the 1997 action/horror movie about giant snakes. This time, scientists journey into a Borneo jungle, looking for a very rare blood orchid that's believed to produce an anti-aging serum. But the scientists learn that to get to the orchid, they must venture into snake territory.

September 10—Milla Jovovich returns to star as Alice in *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (Screen Gems/Sony), an action/horror sequel that picks up where the 2002 film ended. She returns to Raccoon City, looking for justice. Genetically altered, Alice taps into her super-human strength and senses to seek out and destroy the virus that threatens to turn humans into the undead.

planting flowers and greenery, and gave the plantings a year to grow. The goal was to create a "lived in" look. As a result, many scenes could be shot traditionally: the actors were simply filmed as they acted on set, both indoors and outdoors. Some scenes were made traditionally, other scenes had special effects added after the movie had been filmed, and others required using a blue screen, such as the scenes with Gollum.

What makes *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* different from any other film that precedes it is this: there was no traditional set design, because there were no traditional sets either indoors or outdoors. The only props created were ones the actors touched.

Other than the actors, the costumes on their backs, and the few hands-on props, everything else is virtual.

"As far as I know, this is a first," Oglesby says. "Every frame was created on a computer."

Meaning, every shot in the film is a visual effects shot. Every frame was handcrafted. It's a new and labor intensive technique created by a newcomer to the film industry, writer/director Kerry Conran.

Ten years ago Conran began making a short film he wanted to use as a sample to demonstrate his vision and technical prowess. He worked at home on a Macintosh computer for four years to create a six-minute film. With videotape in hand, he began knocking on Hollywood doors. When he knocked on Oglesby's door, she opened it.

"Normally, when you see a short film, it's somebody with no money—like he had. Oglesby explains. "But [a short sample film typically consists of] two people across the table talking. When I saw this, I was amazed. He had this huge zeppelin flying and docking with the Empire State building. Then he cut to gigantic robots walking through the middle of New York City, crashing cars, and I just couldn't imagine how he did that.

"I said, 'Let me see that again.'

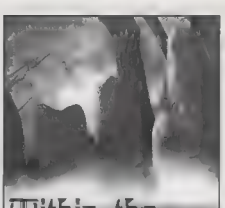
Oglesby introduced Conran to producer Jon Avnet (*Risky Business*, *George of the Jungle*), who was equally intrigued. However, Conran didn't have a screenplay. All he had was the six-minute film and an idea for a movie. After

September 24—*The Forgotten* (Revolution Studios/Sony) is a psychological thriller starring Julianne Moore as a mother whose 8-year-old son has died. When her psychiatrist (Gary Sinese) tells her she's only imagined her son and that he never existed, she doubts her own sanity ... until she meets a man who's lost a daughter in a similar way. This propels her on a journey to prove her son was more than a figment of her imagination.

October 1—Hot on the heels of *Shrek 2*'s success, DreamWorks offers *Shark Tale*, an animated underseas adventure starring the voice talents of Will Smith, Robert De Niro, Renée Zellweger, Angelina Jolie, and Jack Black. Smith stars as Oscar, a little fish who gets into big trouble when everyone believes his lie about killing a shark.

Wes Craven offers a new twist on werewolves with *Cursed* (Dimension Films), starring Christina Ricci and Shannon Elizabeth. After the death of their parents and a werewolf attack, an estranged sister and brother join forces to fight for survival.

October 8—*A Sound of Thunder* (Warner Brothers) is based on a Ray Bradbury story by the same name. Edward Burns stars as Travis Ryer, a big-game hunter. He signs up with Time Safari, Inc., whose owner is played by Ben Kingsley. Instead of going into the jungle, these hunters travel back in time to hunt dinosaurs. To avoid any events whose outcome might impact the course of time, these trips are designed so that the hunters kill only dinosaurs that are already going to die. Travis accidentally steps off the designated path and onto a butterfly, killing it. This single action causes a chain of events that threatens to wipe out humanity. Travis works with the inventor of the time machine to save the world.



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discussing story ideas for a few days, Avnet committed to making the film. What he didn't know, however, is that it would be a six-year journey.

First, Avnet worked with Conran to write the script, which happened over the course of two years. It took another four years to make the movie.

"Jon and I didn't know that Kerry would be able to write a script that was commercial and something that actors would want to do," Oglesby says. "I saw him as a computer tech person. I did n't know if he had a sense of humor or any sense of romance. But as we were working on the script, he would write these scenes and they would be hilarious and touching—they had everything. But he's not a fast worker. It takes him a while."

Avnet adds, "He was a bit more 'boys with toys,' and I was bit more relationship-based. Between the two of us, we came up with a pretty decent screenplay that accomplished both. I set out to cast the movie, and that's when things got pretty exciting."

Substitute "things got pretty exciting" with "we got who we wanted." How did they do it? By using Conran's secret weapon: the six-minute sample.

When Jude Law saw Conran's six minutes, he was so excited that he not only agreed to star, but he became one of the producers. The next target was Gwyneth Paltrow. When she asked to see the script, Avnet refused, insisting she watch their secret weapon first.

"I arranged for her to see it with Jude in London," Avnet says. "Gwyneth was very excited. She wanted to commit, and I said, 'You can't commit, you have to read the screenplay,' because I wanted to make sure she knew exactly what she was committing to."

Everyone involved with the film committed to a wholly new way of making a movie. First, the movie was made with digital stand-ins for the actors. This version of the movie is the "animatics"—essentially a moving storyboard.

Just as Conran had created his six-minute sample on his home computer, the production team created the entire film on a multitude of Macintoshes. The film is a combination of photographic images from the past, footage of the actors on the blue screen set, and state-of-the-art visual effects. The result is breath-taking and mesmerizing. Just as Lucas turned to old-fashioned serials for inspiration, Conran and his team turned to similar sources.

The world of *Sky Captain* was inspired by the 1927 silent film Metropolis, serials like *Buck Rogers* (1939) and *Flash Gordon* (1936), the film noir like Superman cartoons of Max Fleischer, and vintage newsreels, specifically of the 1939 World's Fair that featured a World of Tomorrow with megalithic structures.

"Kerry always jokes and says he's stolen something from all his favorite movies, which is, in a way, kind of true," Oglesby says. "He's definitely made it his own, but there's definitely *Metropolis* in there, there's *Raiders*, there's a lot of comic book stuff. *Batman* was a big influence, and a lot of movies."

Tense moments. Law's Sky Captain, and Paltrow's Polly are no strangers to adventure, or each other.

It was only after the animatics were complete that the production moved to the George Lucas sound stage in London, where the first *Star Wars* movie was shot.

The actors worked in what Paltrow calls a "big, blue cavern"- a sound stage where the floor and all walls were blue screen.

Oglesby described how they used the animatics. "That's what the actors looked at when we were on stage—there was nothing else for them to see. There were things there that they touched, but everything else was virtual. In order for them to know where things were, and the world that we were going to create, they would look at the animatics for each shot."

"It's strange, but they do have a lot of graphics and a lot of things you can look at to reference," Jolie says. "So you can imagine yourself in a situation or place."

For example, in one scene Polly climbs down from the wing of an airplane. She slides down the wing on her stomach, lands her feet on one of the airplane's tires, and finally steps down to the ground. The airplane wing is the only real prop on the set, attached to a structure covered with blue-screen material. Instead of stepping onto the airplane's tire, Paltrow actually stepped onto a blue box that's exactly the same height as the tire would be if it were there. But before filming the scene, Paltrow was able to watch her digital stand-in act the same scene in the animatics version of the movie. This allowed Paltrow to see not only the action she needed to perform, but what the plane and the rest of the virtual set looked like.

The overall effect is unique and seamless.

"Blazing a new trail is tiring," Avnet says. "It's frustrating. It's very, very challenging." The net result is some images that are just extraordinary. Kerry has a visual talent that is quite precocious.

"This film is a breakthrough because Kerry has a great visual talent to go with the technical talent. And so you could do something that's a breakthrough, but nobody would care, you wouldn't respond to it on an aesthetic level. What Kerry manages to combine in this film is this technical wizardry and a great eye for frame, for composition, for color, for light, and then being able to translate it into actual images instead of just talking a good game."

With the completion of *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*, Conran is certainly one of the most creative and innovative writer/directors of our time. Which begs the question. Is it possible he could join the ranks of filmmakers like George Lucas and M. Night Shyamalan?

"What he originally wanted to do was make a movie for a million dollars, in black and white, with no-name actors," Oglesby says. "And what this turned into is a huge Hollywood movie with some of the biggest stars, and it's colonized."

"It's very difficult to make any predictions about what people's careers could be," Avnet says about Conran. "Kerry's very monomaniacal. This is what he's been doing for 10 years. He's not the quickest filmmaker I've ever worked with, but he's got a real talent. I hope for all of us in the audience that he does something again .. maybe, by the way, another one of these, depending on how successful it is."

Avnet goes on, "One of the nice things about the way this came together was that it was a combination of a very strong belief in the movie, in what Kerry was trying to do. There were an awful lot of people who started with me, who put a lot of time in this thing when it wasn't sexy and it didn't look like it was going to be what it is in terms of a finished movie, nor did it appear to have the kind of commercial viability that it has now with the studio getting involved. In a way, it was kind of a subversive venture, which we tried to do outside of the studio to support Kerry's vision. There's something nice about the way a lot of people came together to do that."

Avnet continues, "If the movie doesn't work, all this great innovation and all these things that we may want to pat ourselves on the back for don't really mean that much. No one cares how hard it is to make—they only care if they'll be entertained, and that is as it should be."

At the same time, Avnet and company sound excited and hopeful at the end of this long journey. Odds are, *Sky Captain* is a franchise waiting to happen.

Jolie offers her own vote of confidence. She's excited about seeing the finished film onscreen. "A lot of people don't make this much effort in films anymore."

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By Karen O'Connor

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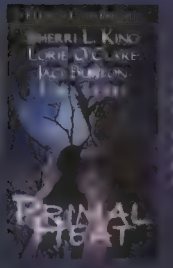

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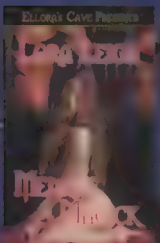

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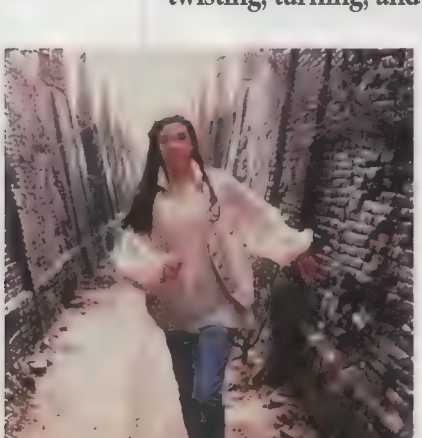
By Ari Berk

The Dance of the Labyrinth is twisting, turning, and timeless.



Losing her bearings, Jennifer Connelly finds herself in a nightmarish and strangely inhabited maze in the 1986 film Labyrinth.

I know there is an Other in the shadows.
Whose fate it is to wear out the long solitudes
which weave and unweave this Hades
and to long for my blood and devour my death
Each of us seeks the other If only this
were the final day of waiting
— from "The Labyrinth" by Jorge Luis Borges

Labyrinths are tricky things: dark avenues and turns, lots of footwork, occasional monsters or maypoles, complex riddles to be solved, and all these to be dealt with before the long walk back out again. Even the meaning of the word is the subject of much confusion, so before entering the labyrinth, it might be best to define our terms. Even now, most people think that labyrinths and mazes are the same thing. Not quite so, though the words are often thought to be synonymous. Following the principles set out by Hermann Kern in his exceptional book *Through the Labyrinth* (to which this article is tremendously indebted), we learn that a true labyrinth is a structure or design whose path can assume numerous forms, but cannot intersect itself. There are no choices for the traveler. You must enter and exit in the same place. Also, your path will fold back on itself, changing direction frequently, and will fill the entire space within its boundaries. It will move you temptingly past the center and then away again before leading you, eventually, to the center. Anything else is a maze. Now that we've established the difference, you needn't worry too much about it. Positively all the best people (folks like Herodotus and Diodorus) have confused the two, so you're in good company. Why, during the Renaissance, labyrinths—and often mazes as well—were called Jardins de Daedalus, "Gardens of Daedalus," and referred merely to "any problem that required a quest toward a unique solution." For the composer Alexander Agricola (1460–1506), his "secret labyrinth" represented his remarkable and unorthodox treatment of hexachordal modulation. Thus those who set a complex task for themselves—artists, architects, philosophers, or poets—enter the labyrinth each time they seek a visionary solution. In this way, many have thought that it's the problem posed, its effect on the mind, that is significant, not the actual shape of the structure that represents the path or process of solution.

Origins

In threading the history of labyrinths, etymology is little help, for the word's origin is still in dispute. Most frequently, the definitions referred to will include "*labyrinthos* = house of the double-headed ax (*labrys*) = palace of Knossos on Crete, but this has proven untenable" (Kern:25). So let us turn to literature. The first (likely) reference to the term "labyrinth" suggests that it signifies a notable (perhaps stone) structure or defined area. On a clay tablet found at Knossos is a Linear B script dating to ca 1400 BCE that has been translated to read, "One jar of honey to all the gods, one jar of honey to the

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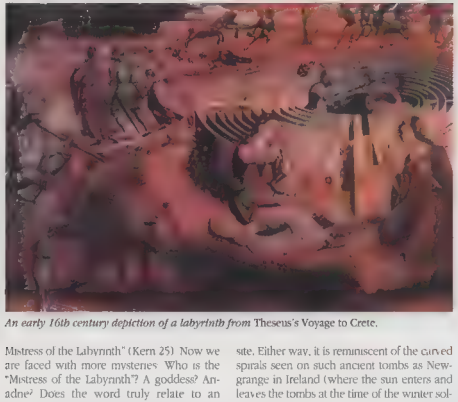

An early 16th century depiction of a labyrinth from Theseus's Voyage to Crete.

Mistress of the Labyrnth" (Kern 25) Now we are faced with more mysteries Who is the "Mistress of the Labyrnth"? A goddess? Ariadne? Does the word truly relate to an enclosed structure, or instead to something marked out along the ground, standing in the open air, like a ritual space? Kern suggests the most that may be said is that it refers to something of stone Again, just as we glimpse the center, we are forced back out to the margins. But among the stones is a good place to look for labyrnths, indeed, carved labyrnths are not uncommon among petroglyphs across the world

Petroglyphs and Other Signs

EARLY EVIDENCE of labyrnths can be found as carved pictographs throughout Spain, in Ireland, near Tintagel in England, in Pompeii, Italy, and in Syria, Romania, Egypt, Pompeii, Turkey, and Morocco In Cornwall and northwestern Spain, some speculate they were associated with Bronze Age tin mining (Kern.67). In such places, they may have stood as statements regarding the miners' view of themselves relative to the land As miners, they descended into the womb of the earth, so the labyrinth might have symbolized the path of their journey and their hopes for a successful return. But the stones themselves will neither confirm nor deny this interpretation

This idea is perhaps strengthened by a carved labyrnth in Sardinia adorning the roof of an underground chamber tomb dating to the second half of the third millennium BCE (Kern.67) Like most labyrinth petroglyphs, it is of the Cretan seven-circuit type. There is speculation about the date of the carving, though Kern thinks the tomb and carved labyrinth are from the same period Such tombs were used repeatedly, so it is possible that the petroglyph may have been carved later to reemphasize the significance of the site. Either way, it is reminiscent of the curved spirals seen on such ancient tombs as Newgrange in Ireland (where the sun enters and leaves the tombs at the time of the winter solstice) and may invoke similar metaphors regarding descent and emergence. The labyrnth, however, symbolizes not to the path of the sun, but that of the spirits of the dead who likewise journeyed for a time in the Underworld before returning to the sunlit lands

Labyrnths appear in the stories and basketry of the Pima and the Tohono o'Odham peoples of the American Southwest Among the Tohono o'Odham, the labyrinth is called "The Man in the Maze," its depiction on baskets referring to the story of I'itoi, or Elder Brother, who remembered and held true to his beliefs while a flood destroyed the rest of the people He was placed at the top of Babquivan Peak, which is the sacred mountain of the Tohono o Odham, and thus was spared. The Man in the Maze represents the many turns and changes people experience throughout their lives At the center of the maze is death, which we may seem to avoid by turning this way and that, but eventually if the nature of the path is accepted, death is peacefully acknowledged and harmony is restored

Among the Pima (who are Piman speakers like the Tohono o'Odham), is the story of "Se-eh-ha's House " Se-eh ha lived in the Greasy Mountains where he built a new home for himself Never before had a house with so many winding passages been constructed This place, he thought, would confound his enemies should they pursue him When it was finished, he made a home for himself in the labyrnth's center. From the top of his new *ki* (house) he saw his enemies approaching in a cloud of dust from the east He quickly retreated back into the center of his home When his enemies arrived they were awed, for they had never seen anything like the building, with its mouth standing wide open like the jaws of a monster The enemies entered and soon were gasping for air, stumbling over each other in the dark. Soon, every one of them had perished. Se-eh-ha was victorious It is also said that the ruins of the labyrinth still exist in the South Mountains, near Phoenix, Arizona (Shaw: 15 16)

As we've seen, the image of the labyrnth can be used to suggest the difficult stages of life and their philosophical solutions either through acceptance or problem solving Among some cultures, even the physical image of a labyrnth, or (more likely) the act of drawing one, was thought to hold power In India, numerous amulets, drawings, and manuscript paintings used Cretan-type labyrnths as apotropaic charms and spells that could assist with particular physical ailments In manuscripts from northwestern India, tantric drawings of labyrnths are used as charms to ease the labor and birthing process, thus emphasizing the labyrinth's widespread symbolic association with transition and birth rebirth

In a related use, labyrinths could function as protective threshold magic Formed from white powder on the ground a meter from the door of the house (Kern 289), these designs protected the house from evil spirits by invoking the labyrnth as a symbolic fortress The drawing itself is not protected and is soon worn away, but the power of the image seems to reside more in the physical act of forming it on the earth The image is a reminder, a place-holder, for the magic inherent in the action

An Etruscan *oenochoe*, or pitcher, dating to about 620 BCE, depicts a group a male warriors exiting a labyrnth in dance. The word "Troia," meaning "arena," or "dance surface," is written on the labyrnth. Kern also mentions numerous references to labyrnth dances in ancient accounts. Although speculative, this may be the oldest definition of the labyrnth a place where the body could, along with other bodies, enact a ritual that followed a patterned path laid out on the surface of the earth, or later, on tiles or mosaic floors This is supported in antiquity by Plutarch's references to Theseus's dance on Delos (sometimes called Naxos) as being labyrinthine. In addition, the Game of Troy, the "Lusus Troiae," which is mentioned at length by Virgil, seems to have been a complex dance enacted to commemorate both the founding (i e., birth) of a city and burial ceremonies (Kern:31) Both accord well with the labyrnth's frequent use as a metaphor for death and rebirth

In addition to references to a sacred dance and/or a dance space, one of the most interesting and oldest labyrnthine images comes from Babylonia (early second millennium BCE) and appears to connect the labyrnth to the forest, an association that would become popular again in medieval Europe This

image is a mask of Humbaba, the guardian of the mazelike Cedar Forest and is formed from one continuous piece of clay, reminding one instantly of a brain or intestines because of its coilings. The hero Gilgamesh (with his companion Enkidu) had to face the demon Humbaba

They stood looking at the forest
They saw the cedar's height,
They saw the forest gate
Where Humbaba walked, a path was made
The alleys were straight, the road good
[illegible]rdner and Mauer 133)

Gilgamesh has vision-dreams within the forest and the battle with the demon is sparingly referred on a broken tablet's inscription

[illegible]oad
second time
threw down

They cut off the head of Humbaba (Gardner and Mauer 144)

Gilgamesh then returns to Uruk, where after purification he attracts Ishtar's romantic attentions. The goddess offers to be his lover, but he refuses, citing a list of her former lovers as the excuse. Although Gilgamesh (unlike Theseus) does not return with the monster's head, the plot is familiar. A hero enters the wilderness or labyrinth where he faces a monster that brings out the hero's most heroic (and often violent) aspects. Changed, the hero then earns the love of the goddess whom he then insults (or abandons), receiving her curse instead. He returns to the outer world (usually dusty) cold and famous. What is it about the meeting of monsters that brings out the worst in heroes? In myths, generally, nothing ends without something arriving to take its place (particularly in classical myths where death is so often attended by metamorphosis), so one wonders. After the monster at the heart of the labyrinth is slain, what is born? Death and rebirth seem to be at the heart of the labyrinth's mysteries, but whose death and whose rebirth isn't always easy to discern.

The Egyptian "Labyrinth" and Classical and Renaissance Reimaginings

MORE PROBLEMS. the Egyptian labyrinth wasn't really a labyrinth. It wasn't even a maze. The structure called a "labyrinth" by Herodotus and others was in fact a mortuary temple built by Amenemhet III (who ruled from 1842 to 1797 BCE) to the south of his pyramid near Harwara (Kern 57). Now a ruin, this was once an enormous structure considered to be one of the wonders of the world. It must be admitted, however, that the phrase "wonder of the world" usually meant something akin to, "Hey! This is pretty nice! Why. It's even nicer than the one we have at home!" Herodotus (ca. 484-430 BC) thought that it was the model for the famous Cretan labyrinth and wrote of it in his *Histories*.

This I have actually seen, a work beyond words. For if anyone put together the buildings of the Greeks and display of their labours, they would seem lesser in both

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effort and expense to this labyrinth—even though both the temple in Ephesus and the one in Samos are remarkable. Even the pyramids are beyond words, and each was equal to many and mighty works of the Greeks. Yet the labyrinth surpasses even the pyramids.

In it there are twelve courts with roofs, each with facing gateways, six oriented to the north and six oriented to the south. It contains two sets of chambers, one below ground and the other aligned on top, three thousand in number—fifteen hundred in each set. I saw the upper series of chambers myself, passing through, and speak from my own observation, whereas I learned of the underground series by report. For the Egyptian authorities were utterly unwilling to show them saying they contained the burials both of the kings who had caused this labyrinth to be build, and of the secret crocodiles.

So I speak of the lower chambers from listening to others, but have myself seen the upper ones—beyond human labour. For the ways out through the roofed areas and the extremely intricate windings through the courts arose infinite wonder, passing from court to chambers and from chambers to porches (?), to other roofed areas from the porches (?), and to other courts from the chambers. For all of this the roof is of stone, like the walls, and the walls are covered with carved motives, while each court has a colonnade of white stone exactly joined. At the far end of the labyrinth stands a pyramid of forty orgyiae which include the cavature of mighty figures. The way into this is cut below ground.

(Macauly)

Herodotus may be referring to the crocodiles that lived in a pool near this temple and were so tame that the temple priests would feed them by hand and they (the crocs) would weep when sung to. This labyrinth is not really for entering and exploring. It is by no means meditative, like so many modern labyrinths. It is a place of sepulcher and secrets, and it is perhaps such aspects, even more than its many passages and excellent architecture, that caused Herodotus to equate it with the familiar Cretan labyrinth. In any event, here kings and monsters share the dark and hallowed earth, a generally familiar cohabitation in the labyrinth's history.

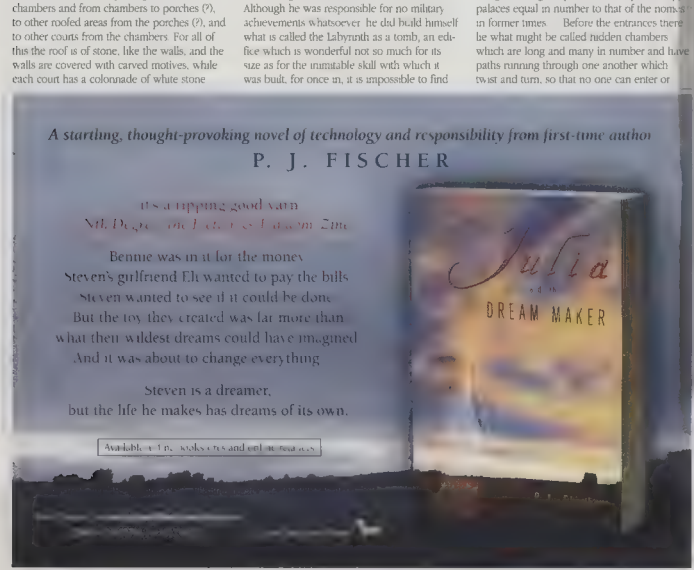
The account of Diodorus Siculus (1st century BCE) stresses the skill required to build a labyrinth as well as the difficulty in finding one's way out, thus equating a labyrinth with cleverness.

When the king died the government was recovered by Egyptians and they appointed a native king Mendes, whom some call Mares. Although he was responsible for no military achievements whatsoever, he did build himself what is called the Labyrinth as a tomb, an edifice which is wonderful not so much for its size as for the inimitable skill with which it was built, for once in, it is impossible to find one's way out again without difficulty, unless one lights upon a guide who is perfectly acquainted with it. It is even said by some that Daedalus crossed over to Egypt and, in wonder at the skill shown in the building, built for Minos, King of Crete, a labyrinth like that in Egypt, in which, so the tale goes, the creature called the Minotaur was kept. Be that as it may, the Cretan Labyrinth has completely disappeared, either through the destruction wrought by some ruler or through the ravages of time, but the Egyptian Labyrinth remains absolutely perfect in its entire construction down to my time.

The writer Strabo (ca. 64 BCE-AD 19) mentions the labyrinth in three passages of his geography.

The total number of nomes was equal to the number of the courts in the Labyrinth, these are fewer than 30. .

In addition to these things there is the edifice of the Labyrinth, which is a building quite equal to the Pyramids and nearby the tomb of the king who built the Labyrinth. There is at the point where one first enters the channel, about 50 or so stades along the way, a flat trapezium-shaped site which contains both a village and a great palace made up of many palaces equal in number to that of the nomes in former times. Before the entrances there lie what might be called hidden chambers, which are long and many in number and have paths running through one another which twist and turn, so that no one can enter or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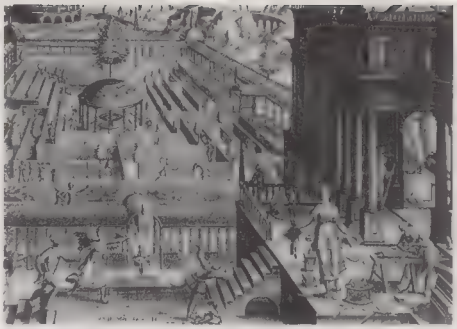
eave any court without a guide

The reason for making the courts so many is said to be the fact that it was customary for all nomes to gather there according to rank with their own priests and priestesses, for the purpose of sacrifice, divine-offering, and judgement on the most important matters. And each of the nomes was lodged in the court appointed to it

Interesting in Strabo's account is the reference to the use of the site by priests of the nomes (administrative districts) as a place of offering to the interred remains of the dead rulers of Egypt. In this way, the "labyrinth becomes a device of memory *and* loss of cleverness *and* confusion, a place that represents and expresses one quality while simultaneously evoking its opposite. He also states that the labyrinth contains "palaces" equal in number to nomes in former times. So it is also a simulacra of the kingdom itself adorned with "districts," a mirror of the land of the living. If the labyrinth (either in fact or in the interpretation of its visitors) could represent the topography of Egypt, perhaps it may have stood for other things as well—other landscapes, other metaphorical paths or journeys, such as the one the soul takes after death.

A passage from Pliny's (AD 23-79) *Natural History* gives a fuller description of the labyrinth's adornments. Pliny mentions architectural deceptions that force the walker to retrace his steps. He also seems to imply that the current locals who live in the lands adjacent to the labyrinth despise it. Why? What does it remind them of? Was it some aspect of the place's history? That it was funereal? Or was it merely the pall that lies over all ruins? Or perhaps it was the knowledge that beneath one's feet there still stood the statues of monsters staring blindly on through time and darkness.



A black and white engraving by Flemish master Hieronymus Wierix, entitled Hedgemaze

Let us speak also of labyrinths, quite the most extraordinary works on which men have spent their money, but not, as may be thought, figments of the imagination. There still exists even now in Egypt in the Heracleopolite Nome the one which was built first according to tradition 3,600 years ago by king Petesuchis or Tithoës, though Herodotus ascribes [illegible] Twelve Kings and

Psammetuchus, the latest of them. Various reasons are given for building it. Demoteles claims that it was the palace of Motens, Lyceas the tomb of Moeris, but the majority of writers take the view that it was built as a temple to the Sun, and this is generally accepted. At any rate, that Daedalus used this as the model for the Labyrinth which he built in Crete is beyond doubt, but it is equally clear that he imitated only 100th part of it which contains twisting paths and passages which advance and retreat-all impossible to negotiate. The reason for this is not that within a small compass it involves one in mile upon mile of walking, as we see in tessellated floors or the displays given by boys on the Campus, but that frequently doors are buried in it to beguile the visitor into going forward and then force him to return into the same winding paths. This was the second to be built after the Egyptian Labyrinth, the third being in Lemnos and the fourth in Italy, all roofed with vaults of polished stone, though the Egyptian specimen, to my considerable astonishment, has its entrance and columns made of Parian marble, while the rest is of Aswan granite; such masses being put together as time itself cannot dissolve even with the help of the Heracleopolitans, for they have regarded the building with extraordinary hatred.

.. Men are already weary with travelling when they reach that bewildering maze of paths, indeed, there are also lofty upper rooms reached by ramps and porticoes from which one descends on stairways which have 90 steps each, inside are columns of imperial porphyry, images of the gods, statues of kings and representations of monsters. Certain of the halls are arranged in such way that as one throws open the door there arises within a fearful noise of thunder, moreover one passes through most of them in darkness.

The last classical author I'll mention, Pomponius Mela (1st century AD), is more hopeful than the rest, for despite the labyrinth's confusing "meandering" a visitor may still make his way back, a vital part of the process.

The building of the Labyrinth, includes within the circuit of one unbroken wall 1000 houses and 12 palaces, and is built of marble as well as being roofed with the same material. It has one descending way into it, and contains within almost innumerable paths, which have many convolutions twisting hither and thither. These paths, however, cause great perplexity both because of their continual winding and because of their porticoes which often reverse their direction, continually running through one circle after another and continually turning and retracing their steps as far as they have gone forwards with the result that the labyrinth is fraught with confusion by reason of its perpetual meandering, though it is possible to extricate oneself.

Of course, for the fullest reference to a labyrinth in the classical world, we must turn from Egypt to the familiar tale of Theseus and the Minotaur. This story is so well known that I'll only touch briefly on its most salient points: A young man, Theseus, sets out to find his father and learns that he is none other than Aegeus, king Athens. Brief joy ensues. But alas, the Athenians must, every nine years, send seven males and seven females to Crete to be sacrificed. Why you ask? The usual. The king of Crete, Minos by name, asks the sea god, Poseidon, for a sign to confirm his lordship over Crete. Poseidon sends an especially nice white bull that emerges almost instantly from the sea. In fact, the bull is so fine that Minos decides to keep it for himself instead of sacrificing it to Poseidon. Bad idea. Poseidon, with enormous irony, causes Minos's queen, Pasiphae, to become infatuated with the idea of—ahem—mating with the sea-bull. This tricky bit of animal husbandry is made possible by Daedalus, who just happened to be residing/hiding in Crete after "accidentally" killing his nephew. Daedalus constructs an elaborate cow suit that allows the queen and the sea-bull to consummate their special friendship. The result: the Minotaur, a monster half man and half bull. A royal scandal! So the first family of Crete decides to hide away their shameful son. Daedalus again comes to the rescue and builds the labyrinth to house the Minotaur. The practice is instituted of making sacrifices to the monster using the youth of Athens. Enter Theseus. He arrives on Crete where immediately Ariadne (half-sister to the Minotaur, daughter of King Minos and Queen Pasiphae) falls in love with him. She decides to help Theseus and gifts him with two essential objects, a weapon (axe, dagger, sword, depending on the version of the myth) and a ball of twine with which to find his way back out again. He makes his way to the center of the labyrinth and kills the Minotaur. Using Ariadne's thread (perhaps a metaphor for women's wisdom, far too infrequently called upon by men in our own dark times), he finds his way back. He then sails off with Ariadne, stopping on a small island or two long enough to perform the Crane dance (a reenactment of Theseus's adventure through the labyrinth) and abandon Ariadne. Under her curse, he sails back to Athens where he forgets his father's request to fly the white sail if all is well. Well, when Aegeus sees the black sail, he assumes the mission was a failure and his son is dead, so he throws himself from the cliffs into the sea, thus giving the Aegean Sea its name. Theseus assumes the throne of Athens. Brief joy ensues.

The Greek hero Theseus dragging a slain Minotaur, Attic in origin, from a "kylix" or drinking bowl, circa 430 BCE.

So Theseus finds his fate by traveling through the labyrinth, but at what cost? Father dead. Wife abandoned (worry not, Bacchus came along and made her into a constellation). What was it that Theseus really gained? Certainly he ended the unpleasant practice of human sacrifice, which is, I suspect, a very ancient motif embedded in this story. And he inherits a kingdom. But it is Theseus's relationship with the Minotaur that is, I believe, crucial. The paths of their lives mirror each other, finally crossing in the center of the labyrinth where they meet as opposites with some remarkable similarities. Each is the unacknowledged son of a king—the Minotaur ends up imprisoned in the labyrinth, Theseus begins his journey unknown to his father. One is hidden away, the other's life becomes increasingly visible and public. They are both political figures, their actions defining and shaping the fates of two opposing kingdoms. Had Theseus stayed with Ariadne, he would have inherited the kingdom the Minotaur would have gotten at the death of Minos of Crete. Inheritance seems to be a central issue in this tale. Of course, it's not only about inheriting a kingdom, it's about inheriting a fate, finding the hidden nature that's been with you all along. At the center of the labyrinth, down there in the dark, something in you is revealed and confirmed. In Theseus, the Minotaur meets who he might have been, a young lord of promise, beloved of his father. In the Minotaur, Theseus meets who he is to become: a killer and breaker of oaths and his father's heart. In the classical world, the labyrinth is the hiding place, the dream prison of monsters, but it is also a site of contagious metamorphosis where we are drawn into the monsters' sphere, assuming their aspects before retracing our steps back into the waking world.

Emphasizing the brief dalliance of Theseus and Ariadne, from the 15th to the 17th centuries, labyrinths and mazes become synonymous with the lover's dance and the garden of delights, becoming the loci of temptations and vices. Of course, such visions of lovers entering garden labyrinths where other lovers are already at play are not necessarily entirely metaphorical. They may also be reasonable representations of the kinds of activities people sought in the private corners of their estates, dalliances hidden away from prying eyes behind the hedges. But there is hope for the young as well. In the labyrinths turning avenues, youths eventually come to seek out the pastimes of maturity. In the *Hedge Maze*,

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Deep within the Book of Legends there is a story of a great artifact created by a brotherhood of holy men. These craftsmen fashioned a circular slab of enchanted quartz.

The Eye of Truth the brothers called it but as its fame spread throughout the lands as an oracle and a magical source of hidden knowledge, to those that saw it it became the Window of Wonders.

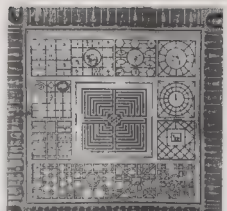
an engraving by Hieronymus Wierix (1553?–1619) the lanes of the labyrinth are filled with mad cows, strolling couples, lonely wanderers, a maypole, and even a duel. All activities engaged in by "men of the 'labyrinthine' age of immaturity between 16 and 32" (Kern 233). These rascals are finally led by the angels to Prudentia (prudence) who resides within the Palace of Fine Arts where she stands ready, like a high school guidance counselor (with a book and various sextants, compasses and globes about her), to translate them into their new lives as adults with viable trade skills.

At this time labyrinths are also used to signify the world and the trajectory of the Path of Life ending in a place that can be variously represented as heaven or hell, depending on the nature or inclination of the traveler. Labyrinths are also used to depict cities, again with their various pastimes and vices, and with a single path, Ariadne's thread, symbolic of the simple road of those who, embracing God, do not partake of the worldly delights of the town. In such depictions, the walker of the labyrinth (of the world) is seen as a pilgrim and an ascetic who is transformed or rewarded not by what he finds at the center, but by the inevitable and certain path leading toward it.

Troy Towns

ONE OF THE MOST ENDURING physical forms of the labyrinth is the Troy Town. These are formed from stones, laid out upon the ground, always in the form of a Cretan Labyrinth. Because they are made of stones and there are usually no related monuments, they are very difficult to date. Found primarily in Sweden, Finland, Norway, and on the Baltic coast, extant places name and church fres. s suggest their previous presence in Denmark, but none exist there today. The traditions associated with them exist now primarily in folklore. Some believe—due to their frequent placement near the coastlines—that they are related to fishing magic and would have the effect of increasing the catch, but whether fishermen had to walk or dance the labyrinth to bring this about is not known (Kern 267).

Also called Völundarhûs, or Wayland's House, the labyrinth in an Icelandic text dating to the 15th century relates to a sort of hunting magic bound in up in a curiously corrupted retelling of the story of Theseus. In the tale, Egeas (Theseus is mistaken for his father Aegeus) went to the court of King Soldan (Soldan?) to court his daughter. The king tells Egeas that to win his daughter he must kill the "Honocentaurus," a creature that may not be vanquished by any mortal skill. Well Egeas goes in secret to the king's clever daughter who agrees to help him. She instructs him on building a trap in the forest where such creatures are known to roam. First Egeas must remove all the monster's customary prey. Then he must get the meat from a wild boar



A reconstruction of the ancient Egyptian Labyrinth by Athanasius Kircher, 1679.

and coat it well with honey . . . to sweeten the trap. When the monster runs into the structure after the bait, Egeas would then run through the trap's "twists and turns," finally leaping onto the central wall of the innermost chamber where he could then kill it. The king's daughter draws Egeas a picture of the trap, "which is called Volundarhûs," and off goes Egeas to do the deed. Seven days later (after much bellowing) the beast is found dead in the trap (Kern 268). Most interesting here is that the idea of cleverness is denoted by Dadealus in earlier stories is now transferred to Wayland (called "Lord of the Elves" in the *Poetic Edda*), who was himself a master of craft. In England, a Neolithic tomb bears Wayland's/Volund's name, perhaps an indication that tombs are places not merely of sepulcher, but of challenge as well, places where one must engage in some form of travel, difficulty, or adventure before achieving a desired goal. Thus both spiritual quests and physical trials may inhere within the labyrinth's spiral avenue.

Although part of a marvelous and complex resurgence in labyrinth walking (and beyond the scope of this brief introduction), some medieval and modern churches bear Labyrnths upon their floors. These are pilgrim paths and whatever is found in their centers is between the traveler and their god. What more needs to be said? If you would know more, get thee to Chartres.

Further Reading

The Idea of the Labyrinth, Penelope Reed Doob

The Greek Myths, Robert Graves

Prospero's Book, Peter Greenaway

Through the Labyrinth, Hermann Kern (absolutely essential reading)

Gilgamesh, John Gardener and John Maier

The Metamorphoses of Ovid, Allen Mandelbaum

The Tempest, William Shakespeare

Puma Indian Legends, Anna Moore Shaw

Fiction

The China Garden, Liz Berry

Jorge Luis Borges—Collected Fictions, trans. Andrew Hurley

House of Leaves, Mark Z. Danielewski

Walking the Labyrinth, Lisa Goldstein

The Maze, Monica Hughes

Lust in the Labyrinth, Patrice Kindl

The Enchanted Castle, E. Nesbit

Lavendar Green Magic, Andre Norton

The King Must Die, Mary Renault

Storyteller, Leslie Marmon Silko

The Hounds of Morrigan, Pat O'Shea

The Innamorati, Midori Synder

Odysseus in the Serpent Maze, Jane Yolen and Robert J. Harris

Literary and Cinematic Labyrinths

IN SHAKESPEARE'S *THE TEMPEST*, upon Prospero's island—a place where monsters are met, lessons learned, quarrels mended, and weddings arranged—both Gonzalo and Alonso refer to the island and their experiences upon it as maze like.

GONZALO: By 'r lakin I can go no further sir
My old bones aches. Here's a maze trod indeed
Through forthnights and meananders! By your patience,
I needs must rest me. (Act 5, Scene 3)

And later,

ALONSO: This is as strange a maze as e'er men trod
And there is in this business more than nature
Was ever conduct of. Some oracle
Must rectify our knowledge. (act 5, scene 1)

With wonderful insight, Alonso seems to imply that the natural world of the island is a maze, but it is also nature improved upon, and we come to see that a clever person (Prospero in this case) may better the natural condition of the world (and his own nature as well) by art tempered with forgiveness. No doubt building from such tantalizing language, Peter Greenaway, in his visual masterpiece *Prospero's Books*, arranges for Ferdinand (son of the King of Naples) and Miranda (Prospero's daughter) to first lay eyes upon each other in a cornfield whose stalks mark out the lines of a maze. As both liminal space where the male suitor is rendered suitable and the garden of lovers' adventures, Greenaway invokes many classical and Renaissance notions associated with labyrinths. These may refer back to the story of Theseus and Ariadne, whose marriage dance (before the unfortunate abandonment) may have traced out the form of a labyrinth on the earth, as well as configuring the male lover/suitor as monstrous prior to the civilizing effects of the formal marriage ceremony. Like Theseus and the Minotaur, Caliban and Ferdinand's lives seem to mirror and oppose each other. Both

Continued on page 88

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By Gahan Wilson

Unearthing an underground classic of fantastic literature.

I had heard of ***Gaspard de la Nuit*** by Aloysius Bertrand (translated and introduced with an introduction and afterword by Donald Sidney Fryer and a forward by T.E.D. Klein, Black Coat Press Encino, CA; paperback, 229pp ,$20.95) a great number of times from reliable sources and understood it to be an underground classic of fantastic literature, but it was not easy to come across. I was lazy and chances are that if Donald Sidney-Fryer had not gone to the trouble of doing this loving translation and a fine forward and afterword I would probably have gone to my grave or pile of nuclear rubble or whatever without ever having read it. So I am very grateful to Fryer, very grateful indeed for it is a marvelous work that I have very much enjoyed reading and intend to read and study many times again now that it has been put within my grasp.

The work itself may have been obscure up to now, but its legend is well established in fantasy's Bohemian wing and its author has always been an archetype of the forever-starving artistic loner whose influence on following successes is almost eerily profound.

In *Gaspard*, Bertrand essentially invented the prose poem form which was first taken up most famously right here in America by our very own Edgar Allan Poe, then hauled enthusiastically back to France by Baudelaire. Since then the richly disturbing images in Gaspard have influenced and inspired works by such legendary creators as Maurice Ravel, Prosper Mallarme, Clark Ashton Smith and Andre Breton, just to name a few.

Bertrand was born in a little town in the foothills of the Italian Alps to the mayor's daughter and a lieutenant of Napoleon's Imperial *Gendarmerie*. The family later moved to Dijon, and the pervasive survival of the medieval atmosphere in that city profoundly affected and shaped him. Indeed, the whole foreword of *Gaspard* is a long, joyful, even reverential paean to the city and its preservation of of those ancient times.

Bertrand began very serious writing at an early age, but although he was welcomed and appreciated by many leading authors and artists of the period, his career was essentially an ongoing nightmare of expectations dashed and great plans gone awry.

He did manage to have his works published in very respectable journals, and they were well received, but an actual gathering of his works into a published book evaded him again and again in a style of what must have been excruciatingly near misses. The only one of a series of plays he wrote was poorly produced when put on the stage and therefore, was a flop.

As if all this continuing wretchedness were not enough, the poor man became infected with tuberculosis and, at the age of thirty four, Bertrand passed away while the famous sculptor David d'Angers sketched him as he lay on his death bed.

In turn, his supporters managed to see to it that *Gaspard* became an actual book. Now, because of Fryer, we have it by itself in a book in English for what, so far as anybody can tell, seems to be the very first time.

TOP Aloysius Bertrand's underground classic now published in English ABOVE: Steve Youll's cover art for the epic fantasy, Gardens of the Moon.

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There are seven sections in the book after its introduction praising Dijon for returning its Middle Ages atmosphere, and thanking it for doing so. The first section called "Flemish School" is a series of what T.E.D Klein in his marvelously witty and perceptive Foreword calls "vignettes" (rather than prose poems) inspired by paintings. My strong suspicion is that this was a strong hint and an instruction of preparation to the reader that the form the author is playing with in *Gaspard* is a magical format that will activate the reader's sense of visualization much, *much* more strongly than ordinary writing, if only he or she will let it

The most famous section of the book, and the one most clearly aimed at someone reading a magazine called ***Realms of Fantasy***, is "Night and Her Glamours." It not only strongly emphasizes the genuinely creepy, but it introduces the only continuing characters in the book Gaspard, the dark, lean, and hungry poet, and Scarbo, the small, sinister, gnomish entity that feeds on him and is otherwise mysteriously and very intimately intertwined with him

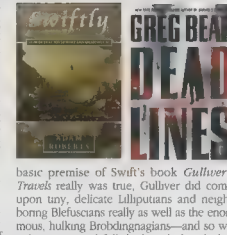
Of all the explanatory sections of the book I most enjoyed Fryer's Afterword It does some very interesting digging into who and/or what Gaspard/Scarbo may/or may not be. It does not arrive at a conclusion, indeed, it strongly suggests that any speculations on the topic are bound to be entertainingly endless, but it gives some fine hints.

He points out, for instance, that Scarbo could be derived from *l'escarbot*, which is French for "dung beetle." He does not go on to point out that the potent Egyptian symbol representing Ra, the sun god (among other things), is derived from the dung beetle since it rolls little round bits of shit perpetually across the desert sands, but I am happy to do so

He has even more fun with possible sources of Gaspard's name. Gaspard is "Caspar" and so might well be the third gift-bearing King of the Christ tale, the one who brought Him myrrh, which symbolizes eternity as myrrh was used to perfume the flesh of mummies There also was a Gaspard de Bresse who was the French equivalent of the English Robin Hood And there was the creepy Caspar Hauser, a 16-year-old boy who turned up out of nowhere into Nuremburg, died mysteriously, and to this day has confounded all attempts to figure out where he came from or who or what he was. Fryer even goes so far as to raise the spirit of Casper, the Friendly Ghost, which is very much the wry sort of joke Bertrand himself might have made

I am grateful for this puzzle and intend to enjoy mulling it over during odd moments for the rest of my life I thank Donald Sidney-Fryer for it and for this marvelous book.

The title of ***Swiftly*** (by Adam Roberts, Night Shade Books, San Francisco and Portland, trade hardcover: 247 pp., $27.00) is a foxy little pun referring to the fact that a couple of the longer stories in this beautifully written book, "Swiftly" and "Eleanor," are Worlds of If based on the notion that the



basic premise of Swift's book *Gulliver's Travels* really was true, Gulliver did come upon tiny, delicate Lilliputians and neighboring Blefuscians really as well as the enormous, hulking Brobdingnagians—and so we in-between sized folk had to deal with that difficult discovery

I think it's highly possible that Dean Swift would have approved of Adam Roberts' vision of what might have happened next, for according to him, we (Gulliver's fellow Englsh of the Swiftian era, that is) could think of nothing better to do with the Blefuscians (it seems we ended up choosing them over their neighbors as the Lilliputians proved too balky) than to import great quantities of them from the new colony to our British Isles to take advantage of their convenient compactness and extraordinary delicacy of touch by using them as slave components of new machines designed to make astounding advances in our manufacturing technology

I suspect Swift might have derived even more amusement from Roberts' dour revelation of the profound feckelessness of those good-hearted folk who, with the very best intentions in the world, formed a movement determined to halt this merciless exploitation of the little people And I am almost sure he would have been mightily pleased with Roberts' neatest and trickiest stab, which is first put into the reader's view when a tired Brobdingnagian squatting enormously on the bank of the Thames wonders if, since the English are clearly more ingenious than his people, could it be the Lilliputians are even more ingenious than they?

Almost all the stories in *Swiftly* end up presenting this kind of a riddle Sometimes, as in "Allen Met the Devil" it's put directly to a tired office worker by the Prince of Darkness himself; in "*Dantesque*" one inhabitant of Paradise springs it on another, but usually it's laid out before the reader by the tale itself

All this intellectual pondering is almost a superficial aspect of these stories At their heart is a great questioning about how the characters solve these riddles and how their internal baggage and reflex emotional reactions help or badly interfere with their solutions

Sometimes, as in "The Siege of Padman," an extremely moving little epic about the dreadful box being a soldier puts a body into, the struggling character we're following comes up with an answer that is gloriously triumphant in its truly horrendous fashion But in most of these finely wrought fables the main characters' internal malfunctioning wins out over their best strivings for solutions and they are very soundly defeated

So, even though I highly recommend it, I strongly warn you not to take *Swiftly* on during a bad day

It's fun surviving from era to era as a reader of fantasy and seeing how effortlessly it accommodates itself to each new period as it comes along

The basic themes appear to be hard-wired within us—and possibly without—and persist with a clean, hard purity Magic, monsters, ghosts, and all such solid staples continue calmly on unshaken, and essentially unaltered, but their explanations mutate with amazing grace

Take the above-mentioned ghosts, for example, the basic topic of Greg Bear's neat little thriller, ***Dead Lines*** (Del Ray/Random House New York, trade hardcover, 246 pp., $24.95). All the excellent ghosts in this book are very scary because they follow the rules we know to be true in our glands or souls or universal unconscious or whatever because, if they didn't, neither Bear nor anyone else would be able to scare us with 'em

But Bear is a skillful and intelligent fellow and knows full well we are up-to-date creatures of 2004 and that he must bring his spooks onstage via some means that will appear convincing to 2004-type persons such as ourselves He knows that unless we're nostalgic suckers for the gothic form (count me in) we will never really buy into a spooky old mansion with flapping curtains (even though he does toss in not only one, but two spooky old mansions), so he looks around for something else that will do for us what a spooky,old mansion did for folks back when something which our up-to-date minds know really does exist, something we are tied in with and want, but—and here's the really important point—something we secretly know we can't wrap ourselves around, that is clearly bigger than ourselves and that works in mysterious ways we really don't understand

And Bear hit on it, folks, bless his heart he hit on what is increasingly a symbol for our contemporary world but which, even in its early stages, has shown itself to be not only horrendously addictive but appallingly dominating in our shared community—the cell phone!

Bear has great fun expanding it into a snappy looking device called a Trans with which you can call *anywhere* (right there you know you're in trouble!) and has more fun on top of that (I swear you can hear him chuckling) making up a slick and slimy operator who is pushing it, an increasingly fretful genius who's created it and shamelessly gives the lab it's being developed in the perfect location by placing it into what used to be the Death Building of what used to be the San Andreas (yes, friends, the fault *is* mentioned) Prison, which is now being enthusiastically developed by smart realtors into an industrial park.

Then, to give his novel a neat little turn of the screw, Bear makes his hero a marginal

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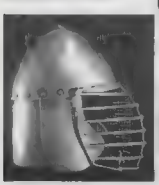

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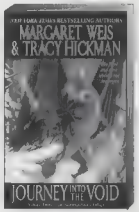

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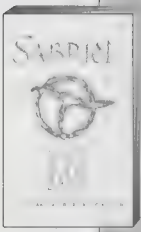

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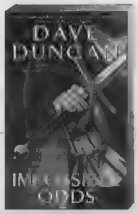

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director of bizzaro movies that continue to impress and influence those who aspire to be in, or actually are in, "The Business," but which failed to boost him beyond the boundaries of the astoundingly exhausting world of not quite successful filmmakers up and into the astoundingly exhausting world of successful filmmakers

I won't go into the plot except to say that it romps along unabashedly and is packed with a multitude of both classic and contemporary Californian ghosts, along with a multitude of well observed West Coasters still technically amongst the living. Lots of fun

Just in case you missed it the first time, ***The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish*** written by Neil Gaiman and illustrated by Dave McKean (HarperCollins Publishers New York, trade hardcover $17.99) has just been reissued and that has given me the chance to read and look at it again and I am happy—but not in the least surprised—to be able to tell you that it's still as good as ever

This time the publishers have included a CD in which the whole book is read aloud by Gaiman although he does a very good job, indeed—which will come as no surprise whatsoever to anyone who's seen (heard) him in action—and you will enjoy it thoroughly. I do hope you don't let it stop you from reading it aloud yourself to any kids you might have around since the book is really superbly built for just that purpose

Gahan Wilson

It's hard not to be hyperbolic in praise of ***Gardens of the Moon*** (Steven Erikson, Tor, New York, hardcover, 496 pp., $25.95) this terrific first novel by Erikson, the opening instalment in his titanic Malazan Book of the Fallen series. Four of these novels have already come out in the UK, to great acclaim, but this is the first to appear in the US. That it's taken so long for a major publisher to bring out what is manifestly a work of genius, a milestone in heroic fantasy that in originality, literary craftsmanship, and sheer readability surpasses almost anything written in the field since Tolkien, is yet another testament to the tumorousness and myopia of those in charge of fantasy publishing in America. The blandly generic cover Tor has given the novel, which has nothing to do with anything in the book itself, demonstrates that even they do not fully recognize or appreciate the striking qualities that set this novel (or series of novels) apart. Check out the cover that the Brits gave this book, and weep.

The word "epic" gets thrown around a lot in the fantasy genre, mostly to describe works that are simply long, if not interminable. Very rarely does the length of these works have anything to do with the legitimate requirements of the story they have to tell. Stories that in many cases could be told to better effect with more economy, or to best effect by not being told at all. But *Gardens of the Moon* is the real thing, an epic in the Homeric sense. It is impossible to read these novels, filled with humans and gods and things in between, struggling for supremacy, simple survival, plain dignity, or love across a magically ravaged landscape in a brutal and seemingly endless war of conquest, without being reminded of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

On the strength of his four published novels, Erikson must be regarded as one of the greatest world-builders in the history of the genre. Politics, mythology, economics, magical systems (and the theories behind them), poetry, history—he has thought carefully about each of these elements and integrated them into a remarkably coherent and lively whole. What's more, he pays his readers the compliment of letting them figure things out for themselves, there is very little info-dumping here, just a slow accretion of detail that allows attentive readers to make connections, draw conclusions, become knowledgeable in the gritty workings of this world and the motivations of its inhabitants.

It is a world dominated on the human scale by the Malazan Empire, a vast and greedy state driven by discord and corruption. Following the murder of the emperor and the usurpation of his throne by his wife, the current empress, *Gardens of the Moon* focuses on the empire's campaign in the country of Genabackis against the cities of Pale and Darujhistan. Erikson tells this story through a host of distinctive characters connected centrally or peripherally to the campaign. From Sergeant Whiskeyjack of the Bridgeburners, the Empire's best—and least trusted—soldiers, to Anomander Rake, inhuman leader of the mysterious Tiste Andii (a tip of the hat, and sword, to Elric here), to Lorn, the Empress's personal assassin, armed with a blade that negates all magic, to Kruppe, a Falstaffian figure for once actually worthy of the name; to Onos T'oolan, a warrior of the undead T'lan Imass, to Cotillion, once the murdered emperor's right hand man, now a god, or something indistinguishable from a god, to many more, all with unique histories and personalities. The scope of Erikson's work may be Homeric, but its depth and breadth of character is Shakespearean.

I can only report with awe how masterfully Erikson weaves all these characters and their narrative threads together, some of which stretch back literally hundreds of thousands of years, across a multitude of dimensions, into a taut and suspenseful novel that recreates the Homeric milieu with seeming effortlessness. What's more, he imbues it with a distinctly modern sensibility. Anyone looking for the timeless battle of good versus evil will not find it here. Erikson is far beyond such jejune prattle, which makes up the majority of work by his contemporaries. This bracingly adult fantasy challenges readers instead of pandering to them. It's the first heroic fantasy I've read that is powerful enough to wrest the genre out from under the dead hand of Tolkien.

What to read now that you've finished *Gardens of the Moon* and are waiting impatiently for the succeeding volumes you've just ordered from amazon.uk to arrive? You could do a lot worse than pick up to ***The Darkness that Comes Before*** by R. Scott Baker (The Overlook Press, New York, hardcover, 608 pp., $25.95). This superior novel, first in the Prince of Nothing series, which features a blurb by Erikson on its cover. I don't know how familiar Bakker is with Erikson's work, but I would be surprised to learn that he wasn't influenced by the Malazan Book of the Fallen. It often seemed to me as I read this gripping novel, which is as much a horror novel as a fantasy, and a bit of a mystery besides, that Bakker had set it in a forgotten corner of Erikson's world. Well, why not? Tolkien has his followers, and some of them like George RR Martin, are writers of the very first rank. Influence need not equal imitation, and Bakker is far too talented and ambitious not to take what he needs from Erikson and then go his own way.

The Darkness That Comes Before is a sprawling, panoramic novel that follows the disastrous course of a holy war between empires of antagonistic magical and religious systems. The plot spans thousands of years, yet focuses tightly on individual characters, notably a world-weary sorcerer cum detective named Drusas Achamian who belongs to a school of magic known as the Mandate; who are devoted to the extermination of the Consult, a cabal of magicians devoted to the mysterious No-God, who nearly destroyed the world two thousand years ago. The Mandate is viewed with scorn and condescension by the other schools of sorcery, as there is no hard evidence that the Consult even exists; yet because the Mandate possesses potent sorcerous secrets, no one dares attack them openly.

Other characters, such as Achamian's lover, a prostitute named Esmenet, and the seemingly more than human Anasûrimbor Kellhus, whose fighting style is a breathtaking literalization of slo-mo chop-socky, are drawn with depth and sympathy. Bakker also depicts with surgical skill the tangled intrigues and betrayals seething below the surface of relationships and events.

Darkness may not escape the shadow of Erikson's *Moon*, but it towers over just about everything else out there. I recommend it highly.

Novelties & Souvenirs, by John Crowley, Perennial, New York, trade paperback, 384 pp. $13.95.

John Crowley is one of those writers whose talents require the roomyness of a novel to fully manifest themselves. Perhaps for this reason, he does not publish many short stories, which makes this collection, a career retrospective, as welcome as it is overdue. Early stories, such as "Her Bounty to the Dead," are humble yet highly polished gems that show flashes of the writer Crowley has since become: a superb and original stylist with an obsessive interest in obscure metaphysics who possesses the

uncanny ability to make his obsessions at least temporarily our own, causing us to question everything we think we know about the world and our place in it. Mature stories such as Snow," "Great Work of Time," and "Missolonghi" showcase his mastery of traditional science fiction and fantasy forms, which he exploits with love and subtlety, and invests with unexpected poignancy. To me the most enjoyable story here, and the most interesting, is "Novelty," the title story from Crowley's 1989 collection. While this story about a writer ruminating in a bar would not be out of place in *The New Yorker*, it is nevertheless steeped in the fantastic, as least as that term pertains to Crowley, and constitutes an illuminating fictional exegesis by the author on his own work, especially the *Aegypt* series of novels, whose coda remains unpublished. All these stones repay close reading, and rereading, but "Novelty" most of all. Still, one must turn to the novels to appreciate why Crowley is widely regarded as the most talented and influential fantasist of his generation.

Another Green World. Henry Wessells. Temporary Culture, New Jersey (inquiries to the publisher at temporaryculture@yahoo.com)

Wessells's stories, collected for the first time in this slim and attractive volume, are exquisitely, even painstakingly, composed, and steeped in a scholarship that is never more exacting than when totally fictitious. In this, his work calls to mind the tricksy fabrications of Nabokov and especially Borges. Wessells's literary form of choice is what he terms the "critical fiction," which (quoting the writer Wendy Walker) "takes as its subject another literary work and treats of that work's construction, obsessions, and sources in narrative and poetic, rather than expository/critical, terms." This may sound rather dry, and indeed, it takes Wessells a few tries to really hit his stride, but when he does, in the novella "Ten Bears," the longest critical fiction in the collection, he creates something truly strange and beautiful, even transcendent. Also noteworthy are the stories "Hugh O'Neill's Goose," one of the most delightful alternate histories I have ever read (though the term is inaccurate as it is really more lacunal than alternate, flouting neither physical law nor known historical fact), and "Virtual Wisdom," in which prose of gorgeous baroque inventiveness undermines a bleak cyberpunk future. I look forward to a novel from this gifted, idiosyncratic writer.

Paul Witcover

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Almost (But Not Quite) Heaven

By Tom Gerencer
Illustration by Craig McKay

I REMEMBER THAT FIRST MORNING CLEARLY BECAUSE I WOKE UP WITH A headache that was somehow larger than my head. I went to the medicine cabinet and rifled around for a while, looking for some painkillers that didn't exist, and then the prophetic and usual knock came on the door

Only it wasn't a salesman this time, or a kid with a flat tire, or even a couple of young guys trying to convert me to Shintoism, but a big, greasy looking man who said his name was Lester

"Can I help you?" I asked him, and he smiled an ingratiating smile and said no, thanks, he didn't think so, and he pushed his way inside

He seated himself at my kitchen table, smiled, looked around, and appeared to be fairly pleased with things, in a general sense

"I'm sorry," I said, "uh, Lester, is it?"

He smiled again, and he said that it was

"Yeah," I said, feeling somewhere halfway between silly and afraid, "could you please leave"

"I could, yeah," he told me, nodding emphatically, "Only I'm not going to."

"I gotcha," I said, gauging the distance between myself and the telephone "And why's that?"

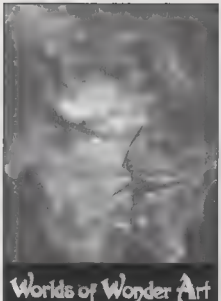
"Because," he said. "I kind of like it here. It reminds me of someplace else I was once, that I liked almost as much, but not quite. For one thing, I really like your wallpaper."

It was nice wallpaper. Only a fool, a blind man, or an aesthetic moron would fail to concede the point. But I was having trouble understanding why wallpaper, however well conceived, should serve as an excuse for such an uninvited intrusion, and I said so

"There are many things we don't understand," Lester told me, drumming his fingers on the tabletop, "and to try to change this often results in the destruction of the beauty of the moment. For example, look at this gourd."

He pulled, then, from the front pocket of his biballs, a little orange gourd, pumpkin-shaped and smaller than an apple

We would have run this story sooner, but a god named Zeke showed up and, well...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"That's a nice gourd," I agreed. "But what I'm saying is, you could enjoy the beauty of the moment, and the gourd, and so forth, outside, or in your own house, or apartment, or wherever it is you live."

"I don't have a house," he told me, "and if I did, it would not have wallpaper as nice as this, I can assure you."

He tossed his gourd up in the air, then, and caught it.

"Do you have an apartment?" I asked.

"No," he told me. "I was thinking of living here."

I told him, in so many words, that this was out of the question, impossible, and not to be considered.

"And why is that?" he asked me.

"There are many things that can't be explained," I told him, "and to try to change this often results in the destruction of the beauty of the moment."

"Touché," he admitted, and then he derailed the natural flow of events by telling me he was the god of hors d'oeuvres.

"Hors d'oeuvres?"

"Just simple ones," he admitted. "No sushi. There's another god for that. His name's Skip."

"What would the god of hors d'oeuvres want with me?" I asked him.

"With you? Nothing," he said. "It's the wallpaper I like, really. That and the linoleum. You don't see linoleum like this every day."

How can you argue with a guy like that? I considered calling the police, but decided against it. I try to keep an open mind. And anyway, how did I know the man really wasn't the god of hors d'ouvres? I mean, if the only true knowledge lies in knowing you know nothing, I'm a genius. Either that or a moron. Sometimes it's hard to tell which.

All speculation aside, the guy did make a hell of an hors d'oeuvre. He whipped one up for me with avocado slices, tomato, melba toast, and a really delicious flavored cream-cheese spread he'd brought along just in case. I was leery of eating it at first, but it smelled so good I let myself have a little nibble, and after that I couldn't resist eating the rest.

"Many such sandwiches are possible," he told me, and he walked into the living room, tossing his gourd into the air and catching it.

I was about to follow him when another door knocker did his thing outside, and I went to see who he was.

"He" turned out to be a she, actually. A lady with a naugahide purse and a heck of a permanent, and she cut right to the chase by asking for Lester.

"Yeah, he's here," I told her. "He just made me a sandwich."

"Has he got his gourd?" she wanted to know, and I told her he did.

"Thank God," she said, and before I could ask which god, she had pushed past me and stomped off into the house, wrist bangles bangling.

I followed her to see what would happen next.

I found her standing over Lester, who had seated himself in front of my television set and turned on the Home Shopping Network.

"Ida!" he shouted at her.

"Lester!" she shouted back.

"There are many things that can't be explained," I told him, "and to try to change this often results in the destruction of the beauty of the moment."

The big man leveraged himself up out of my wingback, and the two of them proceeded to hug. When they had disengaged, Lester turned to me and said, "Ida, this is Moe. Moe, Ida."

My name's Bill," I told her.

"Hi, there," she said, and she smiled at me.

"Ida is the goddess of taking out the trash," Lester explained.

"I come in very handy on Thursdays," she told me.

I was on the verge of throwing the both of them out when I realized I might've hit upon something big here.

"You don't," I said, "by any chance know the goddess of full-body massage, do you?" I asked them.

"Actually, it's a god," said Ida.

"Never mind," I told her.

THE NEXT DAY WAS A BUSY ONE at my house. First came the god of annoying interruptions, followed by the god of reconstituted meat byproducts, followed by the god of persistent nighttime coughs. The goddesses of relaxation, on-the-job safety, and stereo systems came next.

"Could you take a look at my Hitachi?" I asked the last one, but before she could answer me, the god of annoying interruptions, whose name was Zeke, cut in and had us both look at his boil.

I hope it goes away," he said. "I've heard stuff like this can go systemwide and kill you. By the way, nice linoleum. And where did you ever get those bathroom light fixtures?"

I excused myself and hunted down Lester, who was in the kitchen, working on a number of little olive and cream-cheese sandwiches with the crusts cut off.

"You like cream cheese, don't you?" I said.

Cream cheese is a wonderful medium, he told me, "but I enjoy anything that is edible and can also be spread."

I can appreciate that," I said. "And not to spoil the beauty of your moment or anything, but what's going on?"

I'm making some hors d'oeuvres," he said, gesturing at the trayfull.

I can see that," I assured him, "but I was referring to the gods and goddesses who keep showing up. I mean, why?"

"Why" is a question full of pitfalls," he admonished. "It is a word not conducive to the proper, joyful preparation of sandwiches. I try to avoid it whenever possible."

I took an hors d'oeuvre, nibbled, and found it to be excellent.

But," I said, and then Zeke turned up and asked me where I'd gotten the wallpaper.

The following weeks brought more of the self-proclaimed deities, whom I would have evicted at the drop of just about anything (since I do not own any hats) save for the intriguing fact that they all pulled their weight to an astonishing degree.

The goddess of flower arrangement, for instance, added an aesthetic depth to my home it had never before possessed. The god of healthful, yet inexpensive, main dishes took the tedium out of suppertime, and I probably don't even need to expound on the benefits of playing host to the god of cleaning the toilets. Of course, there were problematical areas, like the goddess of pointing out minor personality flaws or the god of irritating laughter, but you've got to break a few eggs to make an omelet, a fact that was demonstrated to me every Sunday morning by the god of tantalizing breakfast treats.

All things, good, bad, and otherwise, however, invariably come to an end. One day, while I was putting in some quality time with the goddess of sympathetic conversation, the goddess of answering the door did so and ushered in a tall, no-nonsense looking guy in a deep black suit.

He explained that he was the minor deity of total agnosticism, and that, pretty much was that, except that he went on to compliment my taste in kitchen cabinetry and countertops.

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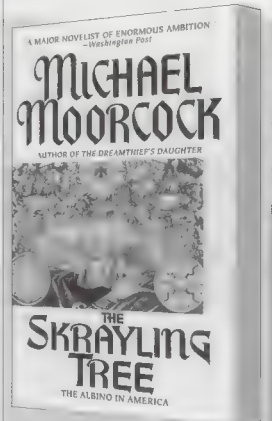

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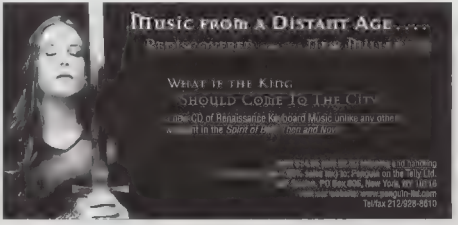
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Embers

By Rudi Dornemann
Illustration by Lori Koelsch

> You can carry a torch for a lost love for a very long time, but it doesn't usually make much difference. Sometimes, however it does.

ONE [illegible] a chalk-and-paste in their courtyard, tucked up in the far corner where the iron fence met the house wall. [illegible] ceramic [illegible] eyes with [illegible] paint and clad in [illegible] cloth. He wore [illegible] heavy doll-clothes and had a note pinned to his shirt: *[illegible] dead or wounded-town, please place body in a Pinedrake Model [illegible] service for two hours.* He had barely enough energy left to hold up [illegible] head when they brought him inside and laid him on the [illegible] wood on and around him.

He sat up around lunchtime.

"Good morning," said Sophie.

[illegible] beachside benches. "It's not quite dragonfire, but I hope it [illegible] is more than sufficient," said the clockwork [illegible]

"We're sorry about your clothes," said Sophie.

[illegible] would we didn't think to take [illegible] off you before [illegible]

Sophie's father knocked his pipe on the heel of his shoe [illegible] out. "We don't get many [illegible] traveling out this way."

"It is not a great inconvenience." The clockwork man [illegible] of the [illegible] steaming.

[illegible] clockwork man's skin looked a little rosy and [illegible] rolling off of him. "Once you're cooled, I guess."

"That will only take a few minutes," said [illegible] looked like someone who had just gotten out of bed.

Sophie turned away, her cheeks reddening. [illegible] blank and uniformed as a doll's, but there was a surprising, almost [illegible] sensuousness to his movements. He had been shaped by dragonfire [illegible] once dressed, he introduced himself. "I'm called Amaro St. George. I [illegible] the name is probably a joke, but my maker never explained it to me."

Sophie's father reached to shake Amaro's hand, drew it back [illegible] heat. "I'm Henry Abingdon. This is my daughter, Sophie."

Amaro inclined his head in a bow. [illegible] gladder that you resuscitated me."

"Not at all. It was simply the Christian [illegible] preacher's always on about feeding the helpless, clothing the [illegible] and the like. I imagine I would come to a severe accounting on the [illegible] if I neglected an opportunity to do good, particularly when that opportunity appeared in my own garden." There was a [illegible] tone that doubted the clockwork man would understand.

She went back to preparing a [illegible] in the embers for the evening meal.

"Did you find my vehicle?" said Arturo. "A steam car? I do not remember last night very clearly, but I remember walking along the road in the rain after running my car into a ditch I doubt I walked far It was late and cold, and I did not have the energy remaining "

"I'm sure it'll turn up, we certainly don't have any other steam powered vehicles around here," said Sophie's father. "Someone's sure to come round with news of it. My store—" he gestured with a half-shrug toward the front of the house, "is a meeting place for most of the folks north of the center We do live mostly by the canal, though, and pay less mind to roads and other ways of get ting about "

Sophie feared this was the introduction to one of his orations on the evil of railroads, so she hefted the Dutch oven off the table and began to stagger toward him. "If you could clear a space in the ashes. Da, this pie is ready to began cooking "

Arturo and her father sprang up from their benches to assist her, and railroads weren't mentioned at all that morning

The clockwork man, however, had been talked of all over Uxbridge village throughout the morning, and by afternoon, nearly every inhabitant had found some reason to drop by Abingdon's Store.

Mr. Obdiel Jacobs stopped in to see if the catalogue boots he'd ordered had arrived, even though he knew no barges had docked since he'd checked the day before. He chatted with the clockwork man about the city and what city-dwellers thought of the new gov ernor. Arturo could tell him about the city—the buildings, the roads, the parks—but he couldn t say much about the people or what they thought of politics

For the first time in her sixty years, the widow Spratch found herself without a single pin. She was later heard to remark that Arturo was a polite young man, a pity about his odd looks. The Reverend Hawthorn needed no pretense to drop by, and began to quiz Arturo on whether he thought he had a soul Mrs. Lessing and Mrs. Prengle rescued him with a flurry of more mundane questions—did he eat, did he sleep, did he play whist, did he have a mechanical wife waiting for him back in the city?

Even if no one meant to buy anything, the shop needed watch ing, and when Sophie's father was called away by the arrival of the barge from Worcester, she took over minding the counter. This let her watch the clockwork man fielding the questions as quickly as they came, calmly swiveling his head to face each questioner in turn

In one of the rare quiet moments, she asked Arturo what he thought of being the focus of so much attention

He made a brushing away movement with one hand, a motion she'd seen Mr Jacobs use when dismissing a question. "It is no great trouble My employers like the mechanicals in their service to answer all questions pleasantly Whatever our occupation, we should also be good ambassadors to the public They feel it will make people more comfortable with all kinds of dragon-fired machines."

Sophie had a feeling in her stomach like she'd just gulped too large a swallow of ice water. "Who are your employers?"

"The Great Eastern, Blackstone, and Narragansett Railway," he said. It was clear this was an answer he'd given many times "Founded in 1814 in New Haven . "

"Shush with that," she said, interrupting him. "This is a canal town Railway talk around here is just trouble talk " He was quiet, looking at her, but she couldn t read the expression in his glass eyes "Keep your peace about your employers as long as you're here in Uxbridge "

He nodded

There were shouts and commotion from outside Ernst Zindler and three of his sons were rolling a steam car along the road. A bit of branch had gotten caught in the leaf springs under the driver's seat and clicked against the spokes of the front wheels

"Found it on the edge of the far field this morning," Ernst said "The cattle were nosing around it like it was another one of their own The dragon weren't too hard to spot- it had worked its way loose from its cage, clawed its way out through the turbine and wandered into our corn, leaving a scorched path behind it. Had it not rained hard all the night, whole field would've been cinders "

Sophie saw the clockwork man standing alone, off to one side of the muttering crowd.

"My boys cornered the beast with buckets of water brought up from the canal. They've got it hemmed in with a small moat right now "

Sophie didn't get a chance to walk over to take a look at the clockwork man's dragon until late in the afternoon. Christopher Zindler was standing watch with three full buckets at his feet. He leaned up against a tree, and a barge pole leaned beside him, handy if he should need it.

The dragon was the size of a large cat. It lay curled in a loose ball, asleep, heat rippling from its scales. As it dreamed, it twitched the nubs where its wings had been Around the dragon was a circular ditch filled with canal water

"Good afternoon, Chris," said Sophie

"Afternoon, Sophie," he said. He reached to tip the brim of his hat, then realized he wasn't wearing one and let his arm drift back to his side. "I hear it's staying up at your house."

She knew who he meant

"Our Mr. St. George is a very gentlemanly device," she said. "He isn't much trouble. He'll pay us for room and board, but doesn't eat our food or sleep anywhere but the fireplace "

"Do you know when he plans to come by and collect his beast? It s tiring work, watching it all day and all night." He looked down at the patch of blackened grass that he was scraping with the barge pole

"I'm sure he'll pay you for your troubles," she said "You and your three brothers, who I'm certain are doing their share of this heavy labor "

"It's railway money," said Christopher "Least Pa suspects that's who he works for I don't know if we should be taking his money."

She shook her head. "I leave you to work it out between your conscience and your wallet. At any rate, you shouldn t be troubled too much longer—the smith's boy was by at noon, saying that it wouldn t take him more than a day to repair the turbine and the beast's cage The mechanical man seemed pleased."

The dragon opened its eyes, blinked, and closed them again

"I'll be glad when he's gone," said Christopher. "There's some thing unsettling about seeing him walk about. It's like watching a pair of the cobbler's wooden shoe-forms go strolling by "

"I don't know," said Sophie. "It's surprising how quickly you grow accustomed to him. He helped me bring water up from the well, and by the second trip, I wasn't thinking of him as a thing hardly at all "

Christopher harrumphed at this and dug at the ground a little more fiercely The conversation didn t last much longer

Walking back home, Sophie passed Arturo as he was going the other way.

"I'm looking for some papers I had with me," he said. "They were in a valise You haven't seen one anywhere? It was brown pigskin I'd thought it was in the steam car "

"Sorry," she said "There was nothing when we found you this morning Perhaps the Zindlers can show you where they found your car? Chris is just off the road up ahead, watching your dragon."

"Ah," said Arturo, "I should speak with him."

Sophie thought about following the clockwork man back, helping him talk to the Zindlers But it seemed too complicated and evening was coming soon, so she hurried home

When she arrived, her father and one of the bargemen were having a smoke on the landing, watching the swallows dart and swoop over the canal

"I don't know what they sent him here to do," her father was saying

"He bears watching," said the bargeman. He breathed out a

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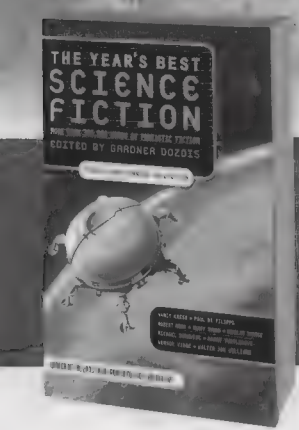

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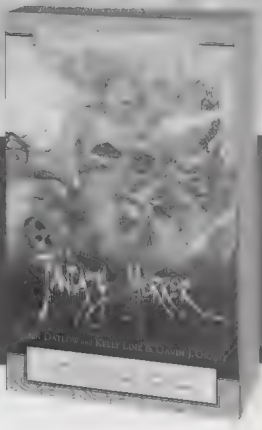

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cloud of smoke. "I don't trust anything to do with the rails."

They stopped talking when they saw Sophie come around the corner. She went into the summer kitchen but, from what she could hear as she prepared dinner, they had moved on to other topics.

Her father left right after eating, kissing Sophie on the cheek and saying he would be at the town meeting hall until late.

She was cleaning up the summer kitchen in the fast-waning daylight when Arturo came back.

"Did you find your papers?" she said.

He shook his head.

She could see that he was running out of energy. He didn't look tired, he just seemed to move more slowly.

"Which fireplace would you like to sleep in?" she said. "The winter kitchen or the summer kitchen?"

"There seems to already be a fire here," he said. "This will do perfectly."

She flushed when she realized Arturo was already half-undressed. She turned to knock the fire apart, then folded his clothes on the table. In the quiet, she could hear his inner mechanisms ticking as they cooled, the spiral of the two-metal spring uncoiling in his heart.

When she turned back, he was already sitting among the embers. "Shoot back," Sophie said, and he did, settling his shoulders against the iron fireback. She built a fire around him, piling tinder around his ankles, building a tent of logs up as high as his shins. "Will this do?"

He nodded.

"What do you think about when you're in the fire?" She avoided his eyes, afraid she was asking too personal a question. "Or do you just sleep?"

"It isn't sleep so much as dreaming," he said. "When I'm surrounded by dragonfire, I dream whatever the dragon dreams."

"And what do dragons dream?"

He leaned back into the shadow. "They dream of flying, of fire and blood—human blood, of cathedral caves under the mountains, of burning cities seen at night from the air. Wonderful and terrible things."

She laughed. "I've seen the one who powered your steam car—how could such a darling little creature dream such grand things? It had such innocent eyes—round and black like a deer's."

"Lucy? I do not think of her as 'darling.'" The reeds and buzz plates in his throat made a noise like laughter. "She is only a year ling. In the city, I am sustained by the fire of the two-century dragon who heats and powers our syndicate's headquarters."

"Syndicate?" she said. She moved back and sat on the nearer end of the bench, the wood against Arturo's shins was beginning to catch and smoke.

"The railway concern for which I labor. I was pursuing their interests when I came to this valley."

She was about to ask more about his work, about his dreams. But her father was yelling from the shop out front, something about mice having gotten into a keg of molasses, so she simply said, "Pleasant dreams then," and went to see what the fuss was about.

The next afternoon, Sophie crossed the field of sunflowers that grew behind the house and her father's shop. The flowers were nearly as tall as her head. She came out of the field and continued up the hill, pausing only to take a look back from the top. Beyond the gray-brown line of the canal, she could see the golds, yellows, and reds of the far side of the valley. This side of the water, she saw her father watching her from the canal-side dock. He sat with his feet up on a keg, giving her a wave with his pipe.

Sophie waved back and went into the barn. Her first few steps were guided by memory while her eyes made the adjustment from sun to shade. Arturo was sitting at a desk he'd made by placing an old door on top of some bales of hay. He looked up as she came in, but his hand kept moving, writing, covering pages of an accounting book with diagrams, equations, and notes, reproducing the notes he'd lost. He had two other account books stacked on the corner of the desk—the ones he purchased from her that morning. He'd apparently already filled them with plans.

She watched over his shoulder while he worked, leafed through one of the finished ledgers. Arturo sketched new machines, his clockwork imagination producing machines powered by the dragons caged in their bellies: engines and furnaces, locomotives and dirigibles, steam cars and ships that had chimneys instead of sails.

"It would be wondrous," she said. Looking into the dark distances of the barn, she could almost see a world of such devices taking shape before her eyes. "If you were riding in one of those dirigibles, how the world would look, seen from the air…"

He shrugged. "These are just some of the things that can be done with modern steelwork. None of these requires manufacturing techniques that are particularly difficult."

"And dragons," she said. "They would require dragons."

He paused in the middle of a drawing and looked at her.

"Yes," he said, "none of this would be possible without dragons."

He went back to work on his book, drawing with one hand and jotting equations and explanations with the other.

After watching a few minutes longer, she went back down to the house. She tried to tell her father about Arturo's designs, about the wondrous devices of the world to come. Although his eyes flickered at her description of what she'd seen in Arturo's books, he quickly grew impatient with her imaginings of the things they could see, the places they could go. He declined even one helping of the cherry cobbler she'd made for dessert and disappeared to another of his meetings before she'd even cleared the dishes.

"I'll be over to Zindler's," he said. "Need to mull a few things over with Ernst and his boys."

Sophie worked late in the shop—the afternoon barge down from Milford had brought a dozen crates to be sorted through, organized, and inventoried, and her father was still out. Halfway through crate number seven she gave up. Her father's writing, crabbed but generally legible by day, became positively cryptic when squinted at by lamplight. Sophie decided it would be better to wake a little early than to strain her eyes any further tonight.

She hadn't heard Arturo come in, but she found him in the summer kitchen, building a fire around himself in the fireplace. A log rolled down from the slope of his shin. When he stretched his arm after it, another tumbled loose. She caught them against the sole of her shoe before they could roll very far. In setting them in place again, the back of her hand brushed against the back of Arturo's arm. His skin had the same delicate glossy-smooth hardness as the bone china she'd just been unpacking.

"Why, you're very nearly cold," she said.

"Yes," he said. "I remained at the barn a little longer than I should have."

Nights like this, she knew, a chill damp wind rose off the canal.

"You should be careful," she said. "You wouldn't want to lose your strength halfway down the hill. You'd wind up rolling the rest of your way down, and you might roll right into the canal."

There was no way for Arturo's porcelain face to show a smile and he didn't laugh. Maybe he couldn't laugh. Sophie worried she'd offended him.

"I suppose our fires aren't as strong as what you're used to," she said.

She checked that the rest of the wood was well-settled, this let her avoid his eyes.

"It is true that dragonfire is more nourishing for me, but there has been a quiet sweetness to my dreams these nights I've slept in your fireplace that I have found most."

"Peaceful?" she offered.

"Pleasant," he said.

She struck a match and touched it to the kindling between his feet. "Sweet dreams to you, Mr. St. George."

"Likewise, Miss Abingdon," he said. "Likewise, I'm sure."

A little before noon the next day, Sophie's father told her to go

up to the barn and ask Arturo to come down to the house "We have some news for him about his steam-car," he said "The repairs are almost done "

She went up through the sunflowers to the barn and delivered the message She felt she needed to say something more. "I didn't see the Smith s boy come by with a message this morning, though Maybe you should just take your books and go You could walk up to Whitin's Landing—I could show you the path and you could hire a horse there to go back to the city."

He was packing up his pens and blotting the page he'd been working on last.

"Do you really need your steam car?" she said

"I must be a good ambassador," he said. "Ambassadors do not sneak out by the back door "

She followed him down the hill

They were waiting for him on the landing her father, a trio of bargemen, and all four of the Zindler boys

When she and the clockwork man where only halfway down the hill, she whispered "Arturo

But he kept walking. She couldn't tell if he'd heard her

jagged and sharp, one of the larger pieces might make an interesting broach Something for a keepsake, anyway.

"I brought you this," he said. "I thought it might serve as a token between us, a token .. a sign between the two of us, an engagement token ." He finally gave up talking and held something out to her.

She looked up from her work and saw the ring He must have bought it with his share of the money from selling the dragon

"Sophia Abingdon, will you marry me?"

She bent to pick up one fragment she'd missed, and only then noticed the writing on the brickwork Equations, plans, diagrams, all in charcoal, wrapping around every surface on the inside of the fireplace. Her vision blurred. There were few young men of her age in the village, and she had no desire to live the rest of her life alone

She stood, and said, "Yes."

When Christopher had gone, Sophie took a bucket of canal water, and a pig-bristle brush and spent the rest of the afternoon scrubbing the fireplace clean When she was done, her hands were red from the lye and the work. She wiped them dry on her

In the quiet, she could hear his inner mechanisms ticking as they cooled, the spiral of the two-metal spring uncoiling in his heart.

The Zindler brothers surrounded the clockwork man, pushed him down on the ground while the bargemen attacked him with buckets of water While Arturo lay there sizzling and steaming, the leader of the bargemen sledge-hammered both his legs and shattered his hands into fragments The Zindlers bound his arms with ropes while the bargemen wound chains around what was left of his legs

Throughout this, Arturo spoke in a calm voice "You can send me back to the syndicate. Just pack me in a box. I can give you the address. I don't need to tell them how I came to be damaged "

They pushed him off the back of the barge Bubbles and steam rose from the water. The bargemen went back to their work, hauling casks up onto the landing. The brothers were quiet, watching Christopher Zindler had cut his hand on a broken bit of Arturo's skin. After several minutes, the bubbling subsided, and it was difficult to see where Arturo had gone down.

Sophie didn't realize she was crying until she saw the expression on Christopher's face as he watched her She turned away and walked back to the house. She walked through the house, out the back door, through the sunflowers, up the hill, and into the barn. She had told herself she was gathering up the account books full of plans in order to burn them The account books were gone; her father must have already taken them

She sat on the stool behind the clockwork man s improvised desk and waited until the sun had set before she went back home

Late the next afternoon, while Sophie was cleaning the summer kitchen, preparing to shut it up for the winter, Christopher Zindler appeared. He wore his most proper Sunday suit. Sophie was crouched down, cleaning the ashes out of the fireplace

"Good afternoon," he said

She did not stand up.

"Afternoon," she said.

There were bits of the clockwork man's porcelain among the ashes. She sighed and picked out those bits—no good leaving them in the ashes where they would just become part of the soap she was planning to make later in the day. If they weren't so

apron and put on the ring

Her father was home early from the tavern that night

"Sophie, Sophie," he said, then hugged her so hard he squeezed the breath out of her

She saw him notice the smallness of her smile

"It seemed so sudden to me," she said. "I guess I'm still catching up to the news."

"Sudden? He's been courting you since last harvest-time, at least," said her father, and he embraced her again. "He's a good match for you."

By the end of supper, she was beginning to show some small sparks of enthusiasm, speaking of when the wedding might be, and whether they should venture into Worcester for her dress or ask her Aunt Josephina up in Clarkton for help and just sew it herself

She resolved to think the matter over

Her father laughed

"What a serious child you are," he said "Serious even in your joy "

She nodded quietly and cleared away the dishes

That night, after her father had begun to snore and after the half moon had risen, Sophie put on her coat and her boots and went out onto the pier.

The moonlight only glinted on the surface of the water, leaving what lay below absolutely dark. Sophie could feel the cold coming off the water She remembered hours spent in this same spot as a child, skipping stones over the canal with her cousins and the Zindler boys She found she was holding the ring in her right hand, pinched between her thumb and forefinger as if it were a small, flat stone

She considered throwing it, imagined the sound the metal would make striking the stone on the canal's far bank, a tiny chiming noise like a distant bell

She shuddered It was cold and the darkness of the water seemed too deep to trifle with

She went back inside, and, in the morning, sent a note to Christopher's sisters, asking if they would like to help her with the selection of a dress

The week was busy with plans and congratulations. The widow Spratch declared that she would be mortally offended if she were not allowed to sew Sophie's bridal dress and would not tolerate mention of Worcester shops. Even with the dress question solved, there was much to do, and Sophie saw Chris no more than twice the rest of the week.

That Sunday, Sophie lingered in the church after the service, chatting with the Reverend Hawthorn about a dozen trivial things before she arrived at the one thing that she wanted to know.

"Do you think he did have a soul," she said, "Poor Arturo?"

"Scripture is silent on this matter," the minister said. "But I believe the answer may be yes. He had the moral intelligence to make choices and distinguish right from wrong, did he not? That is an indication." He looked at her for a long moment. "A pity he left us so abruptly. I would have enjoyed hearing his perception of such matters, wouldn't you?"

That night, she again climbed down from her loft when her father's snores sounded through the small house. She went out to the end of the pier and fished with one of the grappling hooks for nearly an hour before she snagged something. The new ring, slipping and twisting on her finger, bit into her knuckle as she hauled the rope up. The clockwork man was as heavy in the water as a stone.

When she finally got him up on the dock, water poured from the hollow of his chest. He was slick with smears of mud and the chains on his legs were tangled with weeds. She dropped the chains carefully back into the water when she'd gotten them off Arturo. For the moment, she left his arms tied; she couldn't get the wet knots apart. As she hefted him into a wheelbarrow, his body made broken crockery sounds—the clink of shard on shard and the soft grinding of edge against edge.

She wheeled him a few hundred yards up the road, then into the woods until she reached a ravine-bottom clearing. Within fifteen minutes, the heap of scrub and old logs she'd gathered was wider across than the span of her arms. The moon drifted in and out of clouds. An owl called, somewhere far off in the dark, and another, nearer owl answered. Careful not to lose her footing on the wet leaves, Sophie brought Arturo down the last slope to the pyre.

She lit match after match, but what kindling she had with her burned up without drying the wood enough to let the fire take hold. She snapped the lining out of her coat, heaped it like a toy cloud under three of the older logs, stuffed in some birch bark for good measure. The cotton shrank and burned; the birch curls snapped with quick flames, the logs began to steam. Then a darker cloud shd across the moon and a light mist of rain came down and there was nothing left of the fire but a musty smell more like mildew than smoke.

Sophie felt like crying but couldn't do it. There seemed to be so much water in the world already. The mist had gotten in under her coat and her clothes and chilled her skin. She shivered and struck the rest of the matches, one by one, until the box was empty.

The moon came back out and Arturo's skin glistened like a pile of old bones. She loaded him back in the wheelbarrow, rolled him back to the canal and dropped him back in as quietly as she could. She was in bed before dawn.

Sophie overslept the next morning, not rising until the widow Spratch, come to take her dress measurements, was tapping at the door.

One bright afternoon the spring after Christopher Zindler died, his widow gathered their children and went down to the old canal. Near the foundation hole of the house where she'd grown up, Sophie directed her boys to dredge through the reeds and muck with grappling chains and long poles.

She didn't tell them what they were looking for, but she'd raised them to be generous in giving help and sparing in asking for it, and she knew they'd read the seriousness unspoken behind her request. So they dredged, beginning near the old homestead's ruins and working up the canal in the direction that their mother indicated.

The damp was coming up off the water as the sun went down. One of Sophie's granddaughters, four-year-old Armanilla, said the mist looked like ghosts and clung to Sophie's skirt. Sophie scooped the child up and wrapped her shawl around them both. The cold made Sophie's arms and hips ache; she hoped it wouldn't take much longer. She moved to help her daughters and daughters-in-law gather wood. Little Armanilla ran off to find out how big an armful of twigs she could carry without dropping most of them. The older grandchildren were building what looked like a big teepee out of all the wood.

There was a shout from the water; Sophie's sons had found something. Hand over hand, steady but slow, they hauled up the chains; it might be just another sunken branch or scuttled rowboat. When they had raised it almost to the surface, however, Sophie could see the color of porcelain under the stagnant water, faint as reflected moonlight.

"That's him!" she said. "That's him."

Her youngest nearly dropped his end of the chain once they could all see it was a body coming up out of the canal, albeit a body that seemed to have a skin of fine china over a skeleton of tarnish green metal. They wrestled the clockwork man up onto the shore. He lay like a broken doll, arms and legs jumbled under his back.

The Zindler boys waited while their mother found her voice.

"Bring him to the bonfire," she said. She turned to her middle child. "Artie," she said, "you were always the biggest fire-bug in the family, see if you can get this one started. John, Hank, you lean Mr. St. George there up against wood—that's right, right in the middle of the fire—quick, now, before your brother has it all burned down."

They sat Arturo in the middle of the pile, lay some wood across his lap, and propped a couple more logs up against him.

"Good," said Sophie. Puffs of smoke were already drifting up from the kindling at the fire's base.

That night, they had supper under the stars and Sophie told them the story of the clockwork man. She watched the fire until she began to nod off, then her eldest daughter insisted that she get to bed, and drove Sophie back up the road to the house that Sophie shared with John and his family.

Her children fed the fire through the night, sleeping in shifts. She spent most of the next two days watching the clockwork man's body where it sat in the midst of the flames. Once or twice, she thought she saw him twitch, but it was only the air twisting as curtains of heat rose from the blaze that made him seem to move. Enough wood remained for one more night.

By now, quite a crowd had gathered at the bonfire, a hundred people or more, including many Sophie didn't know, people from the nearer towns and even some visitors from towns a stop or two farther along the pneumatic tube line.

The next morning, as the last of the logs collapsed into embers, it was one of the strangers—a school teacher come all the way from Woonsocket—who shouted first. There was no question of heat mirages now: the clockwork man was stirring, kicking the ashes with his shattered legs as he tried to stand.

"Hello," he said. "Could someone please assist me?" His voice whistled when he talked and added a slight buzzing lisp to the end of each word.

John and Hank snagged him under the armpits with grappling poles and lifted Arturo out of the fire. He twisted his head back and forth to look at everyone. He finally found a familiar face.

"Sophie," he said. "You've changed."

Her clothes steamed a little when she hugged him, but she did not flinch from the heat or the jagged places where he had been broken. He managed to get his better arm around her shoulder and he held onto her as long as she held onto him. ❧

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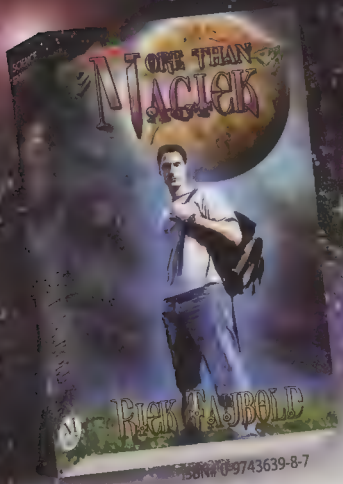

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They Are Girls, GREEN GIRLS

By Ian McDowell • Illustration by Dave Leri

"Death seams up and down the leaf."
—Anne Sexton

The only thing in Boone's Creek, North Carolina, not in walking distance from every where else is Francis Bavier Senior High, named after the woman who played Aunt Bee on *The Andy Griffith Show*. Most of the other students have no idea who she was. I miss Nick at Night and everything else we left behind when Dad lost his job and moved us out here to the sticks. Well, everything but East Durham Middle School, where being a little white girl meant learning how to fight if I didn't want my head stuffed in the toilet every day

Sitting down on the rickety bench, I got a splinter in my ass, not the best omen for my junior year. The morning smelled like a wet dog, and the sky over the Uwharries was the color of muddy burlap. I hoped the bus would come before the rain

Many girls my age didn't have cars, but most had friends or boyfriends with wheels. Not moi The closest I'd come was hanging out with Parker Woods and his pretentious pals last year. I'd been dumb enough to lose my virginity to Parker, who wasn't known for keeping his mouth shut. When the whole poseur posse started snickering, I exiled myself from the ranks of the self-proclaimed exiles and became a true isolato, a word I learned when Deborah-Anne Martindale paid me to write her Advanced Placement essay on Herman Melville Could have blackmailed her for more by threatening to blab that an AP senior bought a paper from a tenth-grader, but I'm not always a total bitch.

This year would be different. I'd meet some hot guy and make cool friends Yeah, and write the great teenage American novel in study hall, win a motorcycle in a contest I forgot I'd entered, or discover my mutant powers just in time to save the school from an alien invasion. Dream big, Rachel.

A tadpole of cold water sploshed the back of my neck. Fortunately, here came the battered yellow death trap, making a too-wide turn onto Main Street that almost ran an SUV off the road. Mabel must be driving. If NASCAR racers could weigh three hundred pounds, she'd have more career opportunities.

It rattled to a stop and the door hissed open. "Hi Mabel! I went all summer missing your luminous smile."

She spat tobacco into her styrofoam cup. "Don't press your luck, Little Miss Smartmouth. I'm having my period."

Down the aisle I saw one new face, which stood out like a piece of maki-sushi on a plate of grits. She was Asian, rare in this white-bread town, even truer than me, and had long green hair. Not the Koolaid green favored by babybats and punkins, but soft as a shaded lawn in May or the moss in the pinewoods where I played as a little girl. Her pink shirt and black jeans seemed more The Gap than WalMart. Clothes like that would have made her an even bigger target at Durham Middle School than I'd been, and while nobody here at Aunt Bee was likely to tear them off her, she could still catch the eye of the bored, stupid, and cruel.

Like an example from the Discovery Channel about the dangers of not blending in with the environment, she'd already attracted predators. Big pug-faced Nancy Salmonson and simpy little Jessica Cooper hunched in the seat behind her, Jessica sucking her lip to keep from giggling while Nancy held a zippo to the back of the new girl's head.

"Cut that out!" I snapped, at which Nancy pulled back the lighter. "Mind making room?"

The new girl gave me a startled deer look, her pencil frozen over her sketchpad. Figuring I hadn't been yelling at her, she smiled a shy little smile and moved over. "Hey, midget, why don't Jew mind your own business?" grumbled Nancy. At the "Jew," Jessica started snickering like that nasty muppet in *Return of the Jedi*.

I wanted to go either Michelle Yeoh or Dorothy Parker on her ass, but detention on the first day would suck and Nancy didn't speak Witty. "That's about as funny as the time your daddy got so drunk at the Klan meeting, he fucked your momma instead of you."

She called me a kike bitch but didn't take a swipe at the back of my head. I'd kicked her ass the last time she'd done that; maybe she was more capable of learning from experience than she looked.

"My name's Lily," said the new girl. "What's yours?" Her accent was American but not particularly Southern.

"Rachel."

"What you said about her father wasn't very nice." There was more amusement than disapproval in her voice.

I shrugged. "Living in Hicksville can make a girl mean."

The flicker of a smile. "Tell me about it. The last two towns I lived in weren't any bigger than this."

"That why you dyed your hair?"

She looked at me like a black-eyed cat. "What are you talking about?"

For some reason I felt like I'd stuck my foot in my mouth. "So they'd leave you alone. Dye your hair, wear all black, they start thinking you'll come to school with your daddy's gun if they piss you off too much."

How could someone so little have such big eyes. When she looked down, they disappeared behind a grass-colored veil. "My father doesn't own a gun."

"Better not let the city council know. It's a requirement for living here."

Damn, not even a little smile. "Don't say that. We've moved so much; I don't want to do it again."

"Lily, I'm just joking. My dad doesn't own a gun, either. I don't think they sell them to Jews in this county. And yes, that's a joke, too."

Finally another smile. "You're funny. Pretty, too."

More of a compliment than I got from Parker. "Ooo, lesbos!" snickered Nancy behind us. To my happy surprise, Lily's finger shot up before mine did. Maybe she wasn't as much of a timid little flower as she looked. I glanced down at her sketchboard. She'd been drawing what looked like a magnolia blossom with a woman's face in the middle of it. The girl had talent; there was something spooky about the staring face, and she'd done a good job with the folded petals, which looked caught in the middle of opening. It was better than most of the designs on the wall of Jake's Tattoo Shop.

"I didn't mean that you dyed your hair just so people will think you're all Columbine and leave you alone. It's really cool looking."

"It's not dyed."

Oo-kay. I'd said I wanted cool friends, not crazy ones, but at least she seemed more interesting than the local whackos, who were less eccentric than inbred. "Dyed or not, you better check to see if it's burned. That's what Nancy was trying to do with her lighter when I got on the bus."

Nancy growled like a pit bull behind us. "Was not, you lying bitch."

For the first time, I noticed that Lily's eyebrows were also green. She leaned forward, reached back, and pulled her hair around so it spilled out across her chest and lap. At the end, an inch-wide swathe was singed and black. Nancy had burned more than I thought.

Lily shrugged. "I needed a haircut, anyway. In the summer, it grows so fast."

There'd been no accident with-a-curling-iron stunk. Instead, it smelled like autumn, when I'd rake the lawn and Dad would burn the leaves.

EVEN IF I'D MISSED THE BUS, WE'D PROBABLY HAVE become friends. We had the same third-period study hall, and since her name was Leung and mine Liebowitz, she sat in front of me. Ms. Blankenship sent anyone who talked above a whisper to the principal's office, but she let you read whatever you wanted and Lily and I were both hardcore readers. By the end of the week we were swapping Francesca Lia Block and Lemony Snickett and back issues of *X-Men* and *Lenore* like fifth-graders with Pokemon cards. All the guys in the class were jocks and capheads and the girls all seemed to be plotting prom queen campaigns, so it's not like we had anyone else to bond with.

We weren't the only freaks at Aunt Bee. I've already mentioned Parker and his crowd of I'm-so-sensitives. Here in South Bumfuck, the goths, waspafanans, and nerds all hung together for protection, and being the coolest-of-the-uncool, Parker was their unelected leader. Maybe someday I could stand being around people who knew I'd fucked that pretentious gloomboy, but not yet.

I had friends before Mom died and Dad started losing jobs, but that was grade school, something that might have happened to a midget alien with my name. Lily didn't have a mother either. Like me, she'd moved around a lot, but farther. She'd been born in Vancouver not long after her parents came over from Yunnan. After getting Canadian citizenship, U.S. green cards were easier and they moved to Seattle, where her mother had died. No details, but I gathered it hadn't been as unexpected as it had been with Mom.

Her dad didn't work at the Konica plant, the way mine and almost everybody's dad, but for the North Carolina Forestry Department, spending a lot of his time taking soil and bark samples in the Uwharrie National Forest. I'd never been there and hoped one day he'd take both of us, but Lily said he didn't like her being in the woods. Maybe I could get him to change his mind after I knew him better. I'd been interested in those woods, less than an hour away from here, since reading *Ghost Stories of the Uwharries* as a kid (I might not miss the wannabe-gangsta bitches, but I sure missed the Durham public library). Unfortunately, my dad's job left him too tired for camping trips, and now that I was sixteen that window of father-daughter bonding opportunity was pretty tightly closed.

Mr. Leung was much like my father, only thin and Chinese instead of plump and Jewish. He had the same way of staring at the world through cigarette smoke and thumb-smudged glasses. They both drank like fish, although Mr. Leung downed bottle after bottle of Corona while sitting on his back patio, whereas Dad was the sip-Aristocrat and-Mello-Yello-until-he-nodded-off-watching-TV type. I once joked it was too bad they weren't gay, as then we could fix them up and be sisters. Lily just looked at me, deep dark eyes under grass-colored bangs, and said nothing. She did that a lot.

Especially when I asked her about the green hair or for any details about her mother. I was used to people being strange and hard to figure out when you didn't know them, but didn't expect it from a friend. She was more of a listener than a talker, except when she wasn't and wouldn't shut up, but then it was always about something she'd just read or seen or wanted, not anything from before she moved to Boone's Creek

On Wednesdays when the new books came, we'd go to Jake's Cards & Comics and make big sweaty Jake and his two mouth breathing regulars twitch That was fun, except for the creepy time Jake wheezed that he wanted to take photos of Lily and send them off to the guy who draws *Kabuki*. Next to his store was Seymour's Tattoo I told Lily I used to wonder if someone had switched the names on the signs, as Jake sounded like someone who'd own a tattoo parlor, while Comic Book Guy sure looked like a Seymour Lily laughed and said that when you were cool enough to own a tattoo shop, you didn't need a cool name

It wasn't big scary-looking Seymour whom I thought was cool, but Jeremy, the younger of his two artists. Tall and wiry, he had buzzed red hair, big ears, and a wicked twisty fuck-me grin. If what I'd overheard girls saying about him at Dairy Queen was true, he'd been shot by his crazy father, which was why he'd tattooed "Love you too, Dad" around the star-shaped scar on his left calf. I'd never spoken to him, but peered through the window of the comic book store when he took his smoke breaks on the sidewalk. I liked his smile and his eyes and the way that he had Calvin on his right forearm and Hobbes on his left. He made me hot

Boy was I pissed when Lily told him that

We were beside the new arrivals rack, looking disdainfully over that *Kabuki* comic Jake had been gurgling about "Another asaphile wet dream," said Lily. I was going to say that at least the girls didn't have scary monster titties when I glanced out through the superhero posters on the window and saw Jeremy taking a cigarette break.

I tore my gaze away to find Lily giving me a shit eating grin. "Rachel's got a boyfriend!" Before I could shoot an elbow her way, she was out the door to where Jeremy was leaning against the lamppost in that I'm-too-cool-for-this-dump way that pissed me off even while making me horny

Crap, she was talking to him Jake's didn't have a rear exit; I thought about shinking to the dimly lit back of the store and pretending to thumb through back-issue boxes (I doubted Jeremy would follow her inside such a geeky place even if she offered him a blow job), but couldn't tear myself away from the horrifying sight Much as I didn't want to, I had to know what they were saying, and one after another my feet pulled me out the door

Jake's windows were so dusty they might as well have been tinted, and as I stepped outside I squinted against the bright afternoon light God, Jeremy was tall. I tried not to look at him, but Lily made it impossible

"This is my friend Rachel She thinks you're extremely hot."

I wanted to run or turn invisible or drop through the sidewalk like The *X-Men*'s ShadowCat Instead, I forced a smile

"You'll have to excuse psycho girl She's the kind of tard who thinks making up stuff to embarrass people is fun."

He smiled in a way that looked almost shy and I realized he wasn't much older than me. "I'm that kind of tard, too. It's cool watching people react when you yank their chain."

Meeting his stare was easier than I'd expected, despite having to crane my neck. His eyes were less blue and more green now "You do a lot of yanking?"

"I'm going back inside now," said Lily, with an expression of feigned boredom "Nice meeting you, Jeremy." Winking, she sashayed back into the store

Jeremy had ignored the yanking crack. "She's a trip Love the hair."

Oh, great. This was one disadvantage to having a friend that hadn't occurred to me before. "Yeah, she's the hot one and I'm the sarcastic bitch." No sooner had I said it than I was ashamed of how I sounded. Not wanting to look him in the eye, I stared at the barbed wire heart on his shoulder and wondered if his skin would taste like ink

"Not the only hot one Sarcastic girls rock."

My face was burning I looked over at the olive-green vintage military motorcycle parked at the curb "What rocks is that." I knew it was his. It was one of the reasons I thought him hot, shallow as that sounds.

He dropped his cigarette and stepped on it. "Thanks, but it's not that cool Belonged to my grandfather. He started working on it when I was seven and got me helping him when I was ten. Died when I was fifteen and us not finished yet Be more authentic if he'd lived. Or maybe not, since he'd look for years for an original factory part, then sell that part when he'd drunk the rent The frame's from a real 1938 BMW-R71, but most else is repro and the side-hack's a cheap kit that isn't even the original design. Dad and me had our last big fight because he wanted me to sell it on eBay and give him the money."

I walked over to it and looked at the sidecar Nothing suggested it was more recent than the frame, but when I touched it I felt fiberglass instead of metal. "Good paint job It street legal?"

He was standing beside me. I stared down at our shadows on the pavement and wondered how they'd look closer together. "Around here Grandpa had a buddy in the DMV and was even pretty tight with the sheriff whose dad used to arrest his dad for running 'shine I might have trouble getting a virgin plate for it, but right now I'm kind of grandfathered in. So to speak."

I laughed and checked out my reflection in the rear view The red had faded but it sure made my nose look big "I still think it's a sweet machine." Not that I'd ever *ridden* a motorcycle, but I liked reading about them. "Sidecars are cool."

He grinned in a goofboy way that made me even more sure he couldn't be much over eighteen "Tried to teach my dog Bear to ride in it, but can't even crank it up without him hiding under the porch Still, it means I can give two people a ride at a time, if you and Lily are ever up for it."

Pay it cool, Rachel, play it cool "You say that to all the high school girls you want to pick up?"

God I loved that grin of his. It made the skin around his eyes, which now had some gray in them, crinkle nicely. "Mostly I tell them to come by my place for a free tattoo Only cool chicks get to ride on the bike."

He'd really turned up the cheese. Shoot me, I liked it "Really?"

"Well, they would if they asked Most girls think it's kind of dorky, like something their dads would build in the basement They'd be more interested if I had a Harley."

He again glanced at the tinted front window of Seymour's, where his boss glowered through the glass "Damn, I've got to get back to that line art But I get off at six on weekdays. You guys come by if you ever want a ride."

It took effort not to watch him go back inside Instead I stared at the street, the passing traffic, the blue sky over the Jefferson Pilot building, waiting until the world and my head stopped spinning "Sarcastic girls rock." That was more of a compliment than I'd ever gotten from any guy

BEES HUMMED IN THE DOGWOODS IN LILY'S FRONT YARD and the doorbell buzzed like a wasp. Mr Leung looked at me through those glasses I always wanted to clean for him. "Nice to see you, Rachel. My daughter said you might not be coming around so much, now that you have a boyfriend."

I followed him inside the little brick house that smelled like a dusty garden "Your daughter's been smoking crack." Mr Leung spoke better English than most locals, so no danger of him taking me literally We went down the dim hall and through a living room so full of hanging plants that I nearly banged my head "She makes a big thing of introducing me to some guy I'm not even interested in, then acts like we're practically engaged."

He opened the French doors, which sounded like they needed a few drops of WD-40 "You know how Lily is with her enthusiasms. You'll find her in the goldfish pond."

The little brick "pond" had come with the rented house. There might once have been goldfish in it, but now there were only lily pads and Lily. She was wearing a green one-piece and lying on her back in the shallow algae-tinted water, her hair floating like rushes.

"You look like an anime Ophelia."

She didn't open her eyes. "Who's that?"

It was a hot day. I took off my Doc Martens and socks and stuck my feet in the pond, wishing there were goldfish to nibble my toes. "Hamlet's girlfriend. He dumped her and she threw herself in the river."

"Please don't do that if Jeremy dumps you."

I kicked water at her face, but she didn't flinch. "Shut up. You're the one he likes—he said you have cool hair."

Lily sat up. "And he has pretty eyes. But don't worry, I'll let you have this one."

Let? I was tempted to tickle one of her tiny feet, which shone underwater like trout, but she was stronger than she looked and might pull me in. "That's generous of you."

She rose dripping out of the shallow pond, all green and white. Squeezing water from her hair, she sat beside me on the bricks. "I'm just teasing, Rachel."

We lay back together on the grass, our feet still in the pond, and looked up at the folded white clouds in the blue Carolina sky. "I know." A hawk circled overhead, trying to shake off harassing crows. "Had a flying dream last night, first one I remember since being a kid."

"That's because you just met a guy," said Lily drowsily. "I never dream about flying."

I'd often thought I could put up with living in this redneck town if I could only have a cool boyfriend, but no way was I going to admit that, not even if it hadn't been a case of counting unhatched chickens. "Yeah, I bet your dreams skip the metaphors and get right to the sex."

She giggled. "Have to know what it's like before I can do that. No, in my dreams I'm alone and high up in a tree and there's nothing around but other trees stretching out forever, so close together I can run from branch to branch like a squirrel. A whole green world with nothing human in it but me, and me maybe not so human either. When school is boring or I find myself hating the people in my class more than usual, I just shut my eyes and go there. Some day I might not come back out."

Wind was rustling in the bushes, so why couldn't I feel it? "I'd miss you if you just went inside your head and never came out." There'd been times I'd wanted to do that.

"Not inside my head, but the other world, the one I'm part of and sometimes want to go back to, even though I've never known it."

I started to ask what kind of woo-woo she was talking about, but there was more rustling and then movement at the back of the yard. Something the color of the bushes emerged from them and padded across the grass at us. From upside-down, it looked like a largish dog some bastard had spray-painted.

I sat up and turned around, starting to call it to me and wondering how to get the paint off the poor thing. When I saw it more clearly, the clucking sound died in my dry throat. Everything went polaroid frozen. It was a dog, sort of, but it hadn't been painted.

Smaller than a Great Dane, bigger than a shepherd, it paused a dozen feet away, its wide, short-snouted head cocked to one side. Its fur was like blades of dark, damp grass, the kind found above the rushes on creek banks and at the edge of uncut woodland. Its ears were like venous leaves bigger than my hands, its teeth were green-ish-brown thorns the size of my little finger, the tongue between them a limp cactus. Its eyes were bright yellow flowers with dark red centers. A fat, black bumble-bee crawled over the left one like a wandering pupil.

"You seeing this?" croaked my voice from somewhere far way.

"It won't hurt us," said Lily with the same easy tone that she'd used when she told me she was just teasing. I was squeezing her hand tightly, but her grip was loose and calm.

Glass and unoiled aluminum screeched open behind us and I heard flip-flops on brick. Mr. Leung appeared at the edge of my vision. Moving like an older or drunker man, he got between us and it. His pale, thin legs shook in his khaki shorts, but not with fear. He had a can of butane lighter fluid in his right hand. Raising it like a gun, he squirted it at the dog, but the stream fell short. He was muttering in Chinese.

The grass on the dog's body rustled, although no wind cooled the sweat on the back of my neck. It made a dry rattling sound and shook its big head from side to side. The cactus tongue disappeared and greenish-black lips curled away from greenish-brown teeth. The eyes that had been sunflowers with red centers now were like angry roses, petals flaring.

Mr. Leung spoke faster and louder, his words more of a bark than any sound the green dog made. He squirted more butane at it. In his left hand was a lit cigarette, with which he stabbed the air.

"What's he saying?" I whispered to Lily, barely hearing myself over the beating of my heart.

She sighed like someone whose father was embarrassing her in public. "He's telling it that its mistress has no claim on me, and that if it doesn't go away he'll set it on fire. We better go inside."

Not letting go of my hand, she stood up and pulled me toward the patio, her grip and the tug of her arm stronger than they should have been. I let her lead me, but kept looking over my shoulder. I wasn't scared. This was all too unreal to feel scared, even though I didn't seem to be hallucinating. "You said it wouldn't hurt us."

"It won't, but Dad might set himself on fire. If we go inside, it will go away and he'll calm down. Please come with me, Rachel. We can talk about this there. Afterward, Dad may let us have a beer."

She still sounded so goddam calm. What did I really know about her? What did I really know about the world? There was a dog made of grass and leaves and thorns in her backyard, as real as the warm bricks under my bare feet, as real as the now-wet socks and shoes I'd left beside the goldfish pond, as real as Lily's shining hair. Maybe there were places where all of those things could be just as real at once, but how could Boone's Creek be one of them? Magic was for books, not the world of high school and tampons and CDs and late afternoons at Dairy Queen and double-wides and trashcans on the curb by 7 AM Thursday.

I banged my ankle on the steps below the French doors. This was really happening, all of it. Mr. Leung advanced jerkily on the green dog, the butane container in his hand glittering in the sun. He sprayed again, coming closer this time.

"Dad, we're going in now," shouted Lily. "Leave it alone—you know you can't hurt it. It's too green to burn."

The dog looked past him at us, its leafy ears pricked high. Then it raised its head to howl, but the only sound was a crackling rustle, louder than before, like a strong wind in a dry hedge. In a flash of green, it turned and was gone.

Mr. Leung stood slumped there for a moment. When he turned around, he looked so old.

"Come inside," repeated Lily. "Come sit with us in the living room. I'll get us a beer."

Muttering more Chinese, he followed. Despite Lily's offer, he was the one who got the beer. We sat on the duct-tape-patched couch while he rummaged in the kitchen. When he returned, he had two cans of Budweiser and two Dixie cups. He opened one can and poured us each a cupful, then collapsed into the scuffed armchair, the open beer in his right hand, the unopened one in his left.

"C'mon, Dad, can't we each have our own?"

He looked up like he was finally seeing us. "I'm not sending a sixteen year old girl home drunk."

It would take more than a can of Bud to do that, but I didn't say so. Beer sure tasted weird when it came from a flowered Dixie cup rather than a stolen longneck, but I didn't say that, either. It was a pity that Lily didn't have the kind of trailerpark pothead father who'd offer his daughter and her best friend a joint in this kind of situation, whatever kind it was. I hadn't cared much for pot the last time I'd smoked it, the night I lost my virginity to Parker, but it might go over better now.

I looked at Lily. She'd been so calm, so utterly unfazed, but now there was a tear-trail on her cheek and she was sniffing.

"What's the matter?"

Her little tin lunchbox purse was on the end table. She opened it and pulled out a Kleenex. "Where were you born?"

At one time I would have thought the question strange, but anything was more normal than a green dog in the backyard. "Fayetteville, North Carolina, not Arkansas." We'd moved around a lot, but all of the moving had been inside the state.

Lily dabbed at her eyes. "What if Fayetteville was like Transylvania or Mars, and your being born there really freaked me out and I never wanted to talk to you again?"

I gave Mr. Leung a silent *What the fuck?* look, but I couldn't read the eyes behind the dirty glasses. "Why would you do that?"

"Doesn't matter, let's just say I did. Would you be sad? Or what if I thought it was the coolest thing I'd ever heard, your being born there, and it became all I ever wanted to talk to you about? Would you like that?"

She was shaking now. I put my arm around her. "I guess not."

She curled into me, settling her head into my lap, shaking gently. "Please don't do that, once you hear where I came from. Let me still be your friend Lily, not some freak, like one of those inbred redneck circus midgets from that shantytown outside of Burlington."

I stroked her hair, which away from the sunlight looked more brown than green. "That's an urban legend, sweetie. Every state claims to have one. I looked it up on snopes.com."

"Yet people believe in it," said Mr. Leung, who'd finished his first beer and was starting on the second. "I know men in the Forestry Service who claim to have seen it, just as I know one fellow who claims he was abducted by a UFO."

What did this have to do with anything? "People believe all kinds of stupid shit."

He shook his head. "No, they believe certain kinds of stupid shit, no matter how clearly false. If you told your father or the school board or the sheriff that the Montgomery County Parks and Recreations Department is full of Satanists who sacrifice infants and bury them in the heart of the Uwharrie National Forest, they might believe you. But they will not if you say that you just saw the Hound of the Hedges or tell them about its mistress, Grandmother Forest. Instead, they will think you're on drugs or crazy, or merely that you want attention."

"You don't have to talk to her like that, Dad," said Lily from my lap, her voice muffled by her hair. "She's not going to tell anyone our secrets. She's my friend."

He nodded. "I just wanted to make sure."

I squeezed Lily's shoulder. "And now you are. I'm not going to tell anyone any secrets, and wouldn't even if I had someone to tell. Lily isn't some freakazoid, she's my best friend. So tell me where she came from and why that thing was sniffing after her." Maybe it couldn't or wouldn't harm her, but I somehow knew it had been hunting for her.

Mr. Leung got up, found a cigarette, shuffled to the kitchen and came back with another beer, some of which he poured into my cup. He looked out at the backyard, then pulled the drapes closed. "Stories like this should be told in the dark, or at least out of the afternoon sun."

He adjusted the creaking armchair. I could no longer see his eyes, but his glasses reflected the tip of his cigarette.

"My family is from the Hengduan Mountains, which are near Yunnan's border with Tibet and drained by the Yangtze, Salween, and Mekong Rivers. Those high slopes, deep valleys, and steep canyons are thick with fir, spruce, and hemlock whose trunks have never felt the bite of any axe. Within its 300,000 square miles is much of China's old growth forest."

Lily was very still. Her head was warm and heavy in my lap, but I didn't want to move her. "Skip the Discovery Channel stuff, Dad," she muttered drowsily. "Just tell her about my mother."

Mr. Leung settled into his chair and puffed deeply, his cigarette a firefly in the dusty dark. "The folk of my village had always been guardians of the high woodlands, where the trees above a certain line are never cut. The Tibetans of the region will tell you that this is because they contain the spirits of the Buddha and the Living Buddhas, but this is not so. No, our stewardship comes from Grandmother Forest, one of the oldest spirits. Because of her blessing, the men of my village are allowed to take forest brides. My wife was one such."

It's a big big world, I thought. How could someone ever find their way across it from a place like that to here? OK, so I was a hick who'd never been out of North Carolina, for all that I read books and looked down on other hicks and thought myself sophisticated.

"One moonlit night when I was small," continued Mr. Leung, "my father and uncles went up the mountain and far away. When they returned, again by moonlight, they brought with them something like a huge seed pod or a leathery brown fruit or an insect chrysalis.

It's ears were like venous leaves bigger than my hands,
its teeth were greenish-brown thorns the size of my little finger,
the tongue between them a limp cactus.

It was almost as big as me, and when they held it before the fire, I could see a shape inside that was not unlike a human shape."

I imagined something like the seed pod of the honey-locust, which is not a bug but a tree.

"My ninth auntie buried it in her garden, in a hole which she covered with ox dung and watered with ass's milk. After five weeks, it was dug up again and the pod-casing gently broken open. Inside was a tiny girl child, silent but alive and covered all over with fine green moss, which sprouted from her body like the hair that grows on infants begotten on mortal women by demons. This, I was told, was Hsiao Tsing, who would be my bride when we were both of age. I told my father and mother and aunts and uncles that I didn't want to marry anyone who looked like a green monkey, but they laughed and said the mossy hair would all fall out as she grew up, and that she would be beautiful."

And what could I say to that? I stoked Lily's head and tried not to think of how her hair felt like meadow grass.

He took a long swig of his beer, burped, and puffed his cigarette. "The Party had its own plans for me. I won't bore you with details of the decree that some children must be sent off to school in Beijing, but I was one of them. I lived in the city until I was almost a young man, and by then boyhood memories seemed like dreams. Surely no girl-child had really been taken from a seed-pod brought down from the high mountain groves, it was just a fairy tale that I remembered as though it actually happened to me, the way certain stories stick in your brain and grow like seeds. When I returned to Hengduan, I was also a guardian of the forest, not in the traditional village way, but through the agencies of the Chengdu Institute of Biology and the Nature Conservancy. In that place where I was born, I met a woman named Hsiao Tsing."

"Was she beautiful, Daddy?" asked Lily, her sleepy voice suggesting she'd asked that question many times before.

The glowing cigarette tip bobbed up and down. "As beautiful as

the dove tree, which grows in the high places and whose long white blossoms waft in the wind like wings As beautiful as the actress Liu Xiaoqing, whose photo from a magazine article on her film *Yuan Ye* was taped to the concrete wall of my Beijing dorm As beautiful as the valley mist at dawn and the tall rushes in the mountain stream Yes, your mother was beautiful "

Like her daughter I wondered if Jeremy really thought I was as cute as Lily, as he'd hinted, and what drugs might make him think such a thing And so the normal world, in which dogs weren't made of grass and leaves and babies didn't grow in ox shit, rolled on. I could deal with stories told for truth in dark living rooms, it was when they came padding toward you in the daylight on green paws that I freaked out

"Some part of me knew the memories were no story," said Mr Leung, "and that Hsiao Tsing was truly my promised forest bride But I would not admit what I knew, despite the color of her hair, which my colleagues in the Nature Conservancy politely pretended not to notice After a suitable wait we were married, and despite the objections of my family, who had spent more time raising her than raising me, I brought her out of the high groves of Heungduan and down to the cities And eventually, out of China itself "

He paused. I heard the ticking of the Lucky Cat wall clock and the hum of the refrigerator and the cries of jays and catbirds out on the lawn and Lily's soft breathing. Maybe that was what had convinced Mr Leung that his wife was just a mortal woman, lying in bed each night and hearing her breath like that And here I was using the word *mortal*, like there was another world in which things weren't

"And that is why she died," he continued "Like a plant that needs a certain soil and light and air, she weakened and withered in the gray city, where no treatment could save her. Yet she never blamed me for taking her away from Hengduan And she gave me my daughter, a gift I never deserved."

"Don't talk like that, Daddy," said Lily in her most little girl voice. "I know I'm more of a pain in the ass than a gift "

"Never," he said, then a few phrases in Chinese to Lily before continuing to me in English "Unlike her mother, Lily doesn't need old trees around her to thrive. As an American poet once wrote, her green mind makes the world around her green She can live in the cities of men, and that's where I'll send her when it's time for college. But my career took me back to the woodlands and thus closer to Grandmother Forest, whom I suspect is angry that I did not properly value the gift I was given "

"But isn't she still in China?" I asked as though I really believed all this. The tiny charcoal briquette at the end of his cigarette moved from side to side "I once believed she was rooted in Heungduan and could never come across the world the way I had. But no, there is something of her in every place where there are old trees, although such places are fewer than they were. In my dreams she comes strolling to this very house, as she strode to dream houses and motel rooms before it, tall and terrible and ready to take my daughter from me. It would not be a good thing to look out that window and see her come Despite her name, she is not some quaint pastoral spirit, an old woman with mossy hair and a shawl of leaves. You would not like her if you saw her."

I shuddered, but Lily just sighed and sat up and stretched her legs, although she continued to sit very close "She wouldn't take me if I didn't want to go That won't happen as long as I want to stay a normal human girl and shop at Target and eat at Beefburger and have a kickass best friend and maybe meet some cool guy who will ask me to the prom. Besides, she can't come here You said she can't come out of the deep forest the way the Hound can."

The tip of his cigarette bobbed up and down "True As its name suggests, the Hound of the Hedges is of the man-made green, a creature of the parks and grasslands. Were I a powerful magician, I could command it to serve me rather than Grandmother Forest and have it tell her that it could not find you. Alas, I know more about soil analysis than magic "

Lily found her tin purse in the gloom and took out another Kleenex "Magic. That's where I came from, Rachel, a fairy story about spirits and forest girls I could go back to the fairy story if I wanted But right now I don't. I just want to be your friend Lily. So whether you believe me and Dad or think we're crazy, just know we're not yanking your chain. We can talk more about this if you really want, but I hope maybe we don't need to, OK?" She blew her nose loudly Do people in fairy tales have snot?

"OK," I said, "you're a real girl and my real friend and that's all that matters." And suddenly I needed a kleenex, too.

IT WAS ALMOST DARK WHEN I WALKED HOME SINCE I WASN'T the party type and the few bands I liked never came within a hundred miles. I didn't hate getting around on foot (except when mullet-heads in pickups threw beercans at me) Still, it would be nice if Jeremy appeared and offered me a ride on his motorcycle What would it be like to have one of my own? Could somebody my size control anything bigger than the tiniest dirt bike?

That's the kind of thing I tried to think about, as the sun sank over the blue Uwharries, swallows and early bats swooping after the pale smears of moths, cicadas buzzing in the magnolias that gave the street its name Not about green hair and green dogs and Forest Brides. Whatever else she was, Lily was my friend and I'd made a promise

The next Monday I was waiting to meet her at Beef Burger, a place whose wonderful tackiness had once been featured in some dumbass Kevin Costner baseball movie and at which you could get deep-fried *everything*—squash, mushrooms, tomatoes, corn, onions, carrots, apples, okra, jalapenos, mozzarella, chopped steak, pork chops, fish sticks, chicken fingers, chicken livers, and chicken gizzards—as well as the usual grilled items. I was having a veggie burger, with a vanilla coke and a cherry-dipped soft-serve cone on the side, which I'd given myself a brain-freeze by eating first They make the best tasting veggie burgers in the world, mainly because they cook them right beside the hamburgers, spamburgers, and fatback sandwiches. Not very vegan, but I didn't care about that, ordering them because I liked the texture and they were slightly less greasy I love grease, but it gives me acne

Hearing the sound of Lily's big shoes, which made her a good three inches taller than me, I looked up She was wearing a black top and white jeans and munching on fried okra from a wax paper bag That and the dipped cones were the only thing she liked here "Why couldn't we meet at Stamey's?"

I'm one Jew who has no problem eating pork, but I'd never run into Jeremy there, whereas I often saw him here, back before I knew how to talk to him. But I was too embarrassed to tell her that "If you're going to be a southern girl, you have to appreciate the culture "

She slid into the chipped formica booth "Yeah, like greaseburgers are more southern than barbecue "

"I'm talking about the ambience, not the food Just take a look around you." I gestured at the flags, the taped-up polaroids of mullet-headed NAASCAR drivers and poodle-haired local pro wrestlers, the NO CONCEALED FIREARMS sign "This place rules All they need is some black velvet Elvis paintings "

She wrinkled her nose and changed the subject. "What are you reading?"

Funny as it sounds in such redneck surroundings, it was Anne Sexton's *Complete Poems* Yeah, she's a patron saint of the I'm-so-sensitives, but my mother had written a thesis on Sexton when she was at UNCG. Holding it up for Lily's inspection, I told her that, "It's the only thing I have that belonged to Mom " The other stuff went into rented storage somewhere, but I wasn't sure if Dad still made the payments

Lily took it from me and read aloud what was written in faded green ink on the inside front cover "Rebecca Jochnowitz. 416 South Mendenhall, Greensboro, NC, 27403, 378-5322 "

"That's where she lived when she met Dad," I said after the last mouthful of my not-so-veggie burger "One night, when I had both the flu and my first cramps and was all dosed up on Midol and Robitussin, I tried calling that number Didn't work anymore."

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"What would you have done if she'd answered?" Lily asked this as seriously as if she believed that dead people could answer disconnected phones

"I don't know if I'd have recognized her voice. She used to read to me every night, but though I remember the words, I can't remember how they sounded."

Lily gently flipped through the book, then handed it back to me. "I don't even remember if my mom spoke any English. I bet yours was really smart, just like you. I wish I was that smart, and could sound so grown up."

I hoped I talked better than most grownups in these parts. "Oh, right, you're such a dumbass."

She shrugged. "Not dumb like Nancy Salmonson or Jessica Cooper, but my teachers give me shit because I'm not as good in school as Asians are supposed to be. They think I'm just lazy." She looked over my shoulder at something. "Oh, hi Jeremy. Won't you sit down? Rachel still thinks you're hot."

God fucking dammit, was she going to say that every time we ran into him? I wanted to dive under the table, but instead looked up. He was carrying his motorcycle helmet in the crook of his arm and eating a chocolate-dipped cone, some of which had dripped on his scuffed black leather jacket. I was glad to see he didn't seem to care. Parker had been anal about getting anything on *his* leather.

I pinched myself in the thigh, hoping it would make me stop blushing. "Have you tried the cherry-dipped cones?"

He made a monkey face. "I'll drink cherry flavored stuff when cough syrup's the only thing around to get high with, but I'm not crazy about the taste. Don't mind the company, though."

Lily slid over to make room for him so fast that the kick I'd aimed her way thudded into the bench, but he didn't seem to notice. "What are you lovely and sophisticated ladies doing tonight?"

"Watching *Sex Feet Under* at my house," said Lily brightly. "Dad's in Raleigh for some conference and she's sleeping over to keep me company. Want to hang out with us?"

He made another monkey face. "I'm not into TV."

"It's not TV, it's HBO."

He laughed, which was good. I hate guys who are too cool to laugh. "You sound like a commercial. But if it's HBO, won't they rerun it a couple of times this week?"

This was turning into a conversation between him and her, with me looking on. Go ahead, Rachel, open your stupid mouth. "That's true." I said nodding too vigorously, "they rerun their popular shows a lot." Our house didn't have HBO, but I knew that much.

His eyes met mine and I went all goofy-ass tingly. Crap. *Words, Rachel, more words, you never had trouble putting them together before.* But before I could come up with anything, he spoke.

"Then why don't the two of you come for a ride on my bike?" He thumped the helmet under his arm. "There are two more of these in the sidecar."

My tongue felt too big for my mouth, blocking what I wanted to say. "Um. Yeah. OK. Sure. Where to?"

"There's a party tonight in the Devil's Dance Hall."

I'd read about that in *Ghost Tales of the Uwharries*. It was supposed to be a big clearing in the woods where nothing would grow. Folklore said this was because the Devil walked around and around it at midnight, and that if you left a stick or a stone or a coin or anything else there, it would be gone the next morning. Très cool, but parties weren't my scene.

Maybe he read that in my eyes. "It's just a lame-ass gathering of high school kids, hanging out in the woods so they can get drunk and smoke dope. They're doing it on a school day so they can tell their folks they're getting together to study. Parents pay less attention to stuff their kids do on a Monday than a Friday or Saturday. Or so I'm told. Dad wasn't the attentive type, even before he went off to the slammer."

I wanted to say something sympathetic like "I'm sorry" or "That sucks," but everything I thought of was lame. "The bike ride sounds fun, but not the destination."

He shrugged, looking sheepish. "I have to go by there and see somebody about something. We won't stay long. The ride back should be nice, just us in the middle of the Uwharries, with the dark trees all around and the big yellow moon overhead. They aren't real mountains, but you can see a hell of a lot of stars from there."

"They are so real mountains," I said, feeling protective of a place I'd never been but once liked to read about. "They may not be as tall as the Smokies, but they're the oldest range in the continental U.S. That's why they're so low, what with all the erosion."

He smiled that damn crazy-sexy smile and his eyes were now an almost pure gray and my heart flipped over like a burger on the sizzling grill. "It's cool that you know that."

Lily grabbed my hand. "Come on, Rachel, let's do it. I've never ridden on a motorcycle, and nobody's ever taken me to a party."

It took some effort to look away from his pale eyes and into her dark ones, but when I did I remembered what I'd seen in bright sunlight and heard in a dark living room. Fuck, why did stuff always have to be complicated? "Are you sure it's a good idea for you to go there?"

She misunderstood me and looked down. "Oh. I'm sorry. Of course the two of you want to be alone."

Idiot. I got up and pulled her after me. "Come to the bathroom with me." Having to deal with her somehow made me feel more confident, with no more stuttering or blushing. "You, motorcycle boy, don't go anywhere." Did I just say that? It would have been cool if I hadn't been worried about Lily.

Jeremy started helping himself to what was left of her okra. "Wouldn't dream of it."

The bathroom smelled like pee and used tampons and the mirror was cracked, making my reflection look like it'd had reconstructive surgery. "Remember what your father said about not wanting you to go into the woods? Remember what we saw in your backyard?"

The way Lily looked at me reminded me of the Hound of the Hedges, when its eyes had changed from sunflowers to angry roses. "You said you were going to treat me like I was normal."

"Sweetie, I am, but I want you to stay that way and keep on living here—I don't want anything coming out of the woods to take you away." Did I really believe something might?

Even in the flickering fluorescent light, Lily's cheeks went bright against the rest of her face. "She won't. Not unless I want her to. Don't ask how I know that, but I do." She slumped and seemed shorter than me, despite her big shoes. "Please, Rachel. I want to be a normal girl. Normal girls aren't afraid to go to parties in the woods."

And what could I say to that? OK, lots of stuff, but nothing occurred to me at the time. Telling her that she couldn't go was like kicking a puppy. Besides, as much as I had the hots for Jeremy, I didn't know him well enough to trust him, and it would be good to have someone else along. God help the guy that Lily and I were forced to double-team, even a hardcase like him.

He was still there when we emerged from the bathroom, and to my relief didn't look bored or cranky or too cool to be waiting for high school girls. "OK, we'll go, but only if you promise we can trust you—you better not be planning to get us drunk and then act out some threesome fantasy."

Was he blushing? So much for his rebel cool. "I can be a dick but I'm not a sleazebag."

I touched his shoulder, an uncharacteristic gesture for me, then quickly pulled my hand away. "I know that." And I did, somehow. "When you want to go?"

He looked out the window. The sun was behind the Jefferson Pilot building. "Now's as good a time as any. It'll have just gotten dark by the time we get there and the party won't be too crowded. I've already gassed up the bike."

Lily winked at me as I gathered up our trash. "I'll ride in the sidecar."

Out in the parking lot, two Latino migrant workers watched from the back of a pickup. One said something in Spanish to Jeremy in a way that sounded too polite to be anything crude and he said something friendly right back, which surprised me. All three shut up when

a cop car cruised slowly by, the driver giving us a once-over from behind his mirrorshades, but it pulled on around to the drive-through on the other side of the building when Jeremy produced two extra helmets from inside the sidecar. He looked relieved.

Unlike his helmet, ours didn't have faceplates and they were both too big for our heads. Lily solved her problem by pinning her hair up inside hers. Laughing, Jeremy got a *USA Today* and made a succession of paper hats, each smaller than the one before it, and then fitted them together and onto my head and the helmet on top of that. As stupid-looking as it sounds, it worked pretty well. "How do you fit so much brain into that little skull?" he said. I tried to take this as a compliment, but it wasn't easy.

He pulled a tattered blanket, which might have once been fire engine red but had faded to an ugly pink, from the sidecar and shook it. "It looks like something's been chewing on it," said Lily suspiciously.

"Yeah. Bear likes it better than any rawhide bone," he said as he draped it back in the cockpit and motioned for her to get in. "But don't worry. I put it through the washer since the last time he got hold of it, so you don't have to worry about fleas or dog spit." Looking dubious, she got in and wrapped it around her shoulders.

He took off his jacket and held it out for me. "It's hot now but it gets colder than you'd think after dark, at least once you're zipping along at a higher altitude. Besides, you're the one more likely to fall off."

I didn't even resist. I stepped into it and tugged the sleeves back to my wrists. "What about you?" His Ramones T-shirt didn't weren't tall enough to be called peaks), but there was still enough light to see the billboards and kudzu give way to pine and hard woods. Shadows pooled under the tall trees and when I looked up the ribbon of sky above the twisting branches was deepening from blue to purple, Venus and the first few stars winking like fireflies that had been blown into a dark creek.

We turned onto one gravel road and then another and then one that was nothing but dirt, curling like a pale, pocked snake between the trees. It was much darker now. A deer bounded through the headlight, opossum eyes burned ten feet up a wrinkled trunk, a flying squirrel floated from dark to dark, and bats dove after bugs dancing in the beam. Leaning back, I looked up again and saw the dark creek had become a twisting river of stars, winking and shivering in a way they never did in town. Under my hands I could feel Jeremy breathe and when I leaned close against his back I thought I heard his heart, but it must have been mine.

As the road curled back and forth, I caught glimpses of the first illumination other than the bike's that I'd seen in miles, flickering warm and orange through the black trunks and brambles. "Devil's Dance Hall" read a white clapboard sign with an arrow pointing beneath it. Our headlight picked up the reflectors of several cars and trucks parked beside the road, then we were in open space that could have been any empty field.

There was a bonfire in the center, a couple more cars parked around it. Jeremy pulled up at the edge of the firelight and shut off

Ten or fifteen feet up, something pale opened like a bud blossoming in the night, bigger than a magnolia bloom and spreading wider than a dinner plate.

look very warm.

He shrugged and I tried not to stare at his wiry muscles, even though I could pretend I was checking out his tattoos. "I can take it fine. My father liked to make me sleep outside in the hammock, sometimes even in winter. To make me tough, he said it was, but it was really because the house is small and he wanted his space. Now that he's in the state pen, I've got the place to myself."

He grinned, not without pain. "I'm sorry," I said, knowing my feeling that way couldn't help.

He got on the bike and motioned for me to sit behind him. "Don't be. The old man pulling ten to twenty is one of the best things that ever happened to me."

Not knowing what to say to that, I climbed on. At first I was shy about grabbing hold of his waist, but he kicked the starter and the bike sputtered, then rumbled to life. When the vibrations shivered up my thighs, scrunching into him felt like the most natural thing in the world. Beside me, Lily winked and I winked back, not feeling the slightest urge to sock her.

The bike sputtered some more as we took the main drag and then a right onto Magnolia. Outside of town, this became Highway 109 and Jeremy opened the throttle. His engine didn't sound or feel as powerful as I'd expected, and I wondered how much trouble it would have with our combined weight if Lily and I were any bigger. No matter, we were flying along at a good clip, the wind stinging my cheeks. It made my eyes burn, but when I leaned close to Jeremy's back and looked at one side of the road or the other, everything was fine. From the sidecar, Lily gave me a grin and a thumbs up.

Since the Bypass was built, this stretch of 109 had fallen on hard times. We passed a deserted Tastee Freeze and a half-demolished Super 8 motel and a giant wicker chair advertising God knows what. A sign read "Barkhead Mountain Range 35 miles." That, I knew, was where Mr. Leung often worked, the northern spur of the Uwharrie and the only part that was still old-growth, the rest being cutover land.

The sun had disappeared behind no-longer-distant slopes (they

his engine. Instead of silence, I heard a boombox playing that ass-hole Eminem. Boone's Creek didn't seem nearly so far away as it had a few minutes ago.

We got out and stretched, dropping our helmets in the sidecar. This far from the fire, Lily's face was a milk-colored mask with dark holes for eyes. When she turned toward the flames, her skin reflected the glow, orange flowers dancing on her cheeks. She slowly spun, round and round, and then walked toward the tree line. I'd been holding Jeremy's hand ever since we'd gotten off the bike, although I wasn't sure who first took whose. Squeezing it, I let go and walked after Lily.

"You OK?"

"She's out there," she said softly, staring at the dark.

No need to ask who "she" was. "We can leave. Jeremy will take us right back if I tell him we have to go."

She unpinned her hair and shook it loose. In the gloom, there was nothing unusual about its color. "No. She won't come for me unless I call to her. That's what Dad's really afraid of, that I'll call. And I might, just like you tried to call your mother on the phone. I told Dad I'd never ever want her to come haul me off to her world, but that was to make him feel better. Do you want the same thing every day, or have you ever wanted to walk out of your life and into a different one?"

Her voice sounded different, not that of my first real friend since puberty. With a sweep of her pale arm, she turned back toward the fire. "You don't usually see them side by side, the world I came from and the world I thought I wanted to be in. But there they are, the first all around the second. It's all around us all the time, the other older world, but you don't see it like you do now."

All I saw was a fire and some kids and the dark shapes of trees and more stars overhead than I was used to. I put my hand on her shoulder, which seemed colder than it should, or maybe not so much cold as a *different* I couldn't name.

And then she was hugging me, tight enough to hurt, the arms around me warmer and more Lily-like than before. "Please Rachel," she said.

I hugged her back, not knowing what else to do. "Please what?"

"I love you, I really do. Why can't I want to be in the same world as you, the way I did Saturday in my living room when I made you promise? Why do I sometimes *like* the idea of walking into the woods and away from you and Dad and everything that makes me human?"

"I need to leave you two alone?" came Jeremy's voice from behind me. He wasn't saying it like a dirty joke, the way some guys would, but like he genuinely didn't want to intrude

Lily pulled away from me "Is that a bonfire?"

Jeremy shrugged "Sure I guess any fire bigger than one you roast marshmallows on is. There's beer. You guys want one while I do my business?" He was holding a ziplock bag

"Sure." Of course, he'd come here to sell them something. I didn't care as long as it was just pot. Lily didn't notice She was staring at the flames and the coolers and the dozen or so people seated there as oddly as she'd stared out at the dark trees.

As we walked toward the flames, a fireplug-shaped guy stood up and came to meet us. I recognized the backwards cap and the big jaw Rabbit Salmonson Not as huge as his older brother Turtle or even as tall as his twin sister Nancy and better looking than either, but impressively wide

He'd recognized me and Lily, too "What the fuck is this, man?"

"My friend Lily and my friend Rachel," said Jeremy Had there been a pause before that second "friend"?

"Yeah, I know who they are, but why'd you bring them? The white one sucker-punched my sister last spring. Broke her damn nose."

Jeremy shrugged "Knowing Nancy, she started something and got her ass kicked. Shit happens."

Rabbit stuck out his jaw even further. "Not to my family, it don't." He was shorter than Jeremy, but looked like he weighed twice as much

Jeremy didn't flinch. "Don't give me that. Remember when I was thirteen and your big brother was ten and I beat the crap out of you guys for torturing that cat? Far as I know, neither of you holds a grudge " Considering the respective sizes of Turtle, Rabbit, and Jeremy, that must have been before growth spurts and steroids

Rabbit was quiet a moment, his face darkening in the firelight "Yeah, so? Don't think it would go the same way now Anyway, that was kid stuff." He sighed, took off his baseball cap and swatted at mosquitoes, then scratched his buzzcut head. "Nancy and Turtle are both hell-raisers. She and him should have been the twins, instead of her and me I'm the peaceful one."

Only in comparison to the other psychos in your family, I thought. Jeremy was more diplomatic "Now's your chance to make peace "

He grinned in a way that made him look almost likable "Shit, I guess it is Gonna smoke the peace pipe?"

"If you got the money."

Rabbit pulled out a role of twenties. "It really kind-bud?"

Jeremy nodded as he counted the bills. "Try it and see. Got something to smoke it with?"

Good, just pot. Not many kids out here in the sticks were crackheads, but I wouldn't put it past the Salmonson clan

Rabbit produced two small pipes, one glass and one ceramic. "So we can start the circle going both ways. These girls get high, too?" His voice was friendlier now, but I didn't care for the way he was looking at Lily

Before I could answer, she stepped forward. "Sure, why not?" Oh, great. It's not that I didn't want to give pot another try, but this wasn't such a good place to do it But after Jeremy's peacemaker talk it was hard to refuse without looking bad

We joined the circle by the fire. Jeremy squatted on his haunches and Rabbit offered his lawnchair to Lily. She motioned for me to take it and then sat crosslegged on the ground with her back against my knees. Among those gathered there, I recognized Jay Skaggs and Andy Beaver and Sarah Jane Oxendine and some slutty looking blonde with really big tits whose name was either Kristin or Kirsten The faces of the other half dozen kids were familiar from the hallways at Aunt Bee, but I didn't know their names Not a large gathering, but it wasn't long after sunset and more were likely on the way With luck we'd be gone before the evening got rowdy, but for now it was laid-back.

Rabbit told Miss Tits to pass us beers from the cooler she was sitting on These turned out to be PBRs, not at all my favorite brand, but I cracked one anyway Nobody introduced us to the bimbo named Kirsten or Kristen or the five guys and one girl I didn't know, but nobody glared or snickered Thank God Nancy and her little pal Jessica weren't there. And where was the other sibling? Usually Turtle and Rabbit were inseparable Maybe the biggest and meanest Salmonson had stopped to knock over a convenience store on the way

THE TWO PIPES WENT AROUND THE CIRCLE IN OPPOSITE directions. The glass one came my way first. It was hot to the touch and Jeremy had to show me how to use the carb. I stared at the glowing clump of crumpled leaf My first toke turned into a series of coughs I felt all the way down to my toes. When they stopped, Jeremy made me try again before passing it to Lily. Steeling myself, I puffed deep and only coughed once. Lily held it in much longer than I had and didn't cough at all, although her eyes opened so big I could see the whites, which were almost never visible. I was fascinated by the graceful way she held the pipe and how it glittered in the firelight as she passed it to Andy Beaver. No sooner had she done that than the ceramic one came round. I gulped beer and took another drag No coughing this time, but I became aware of my own heart and the less regular beat of the fire's warmth on my face. I stroked the back of Lily's head, then did the same to Jeremy where he squatted beside me and noticed the different ways their hair felt good Craning my neck I looked up and up and up, at the dancing sparks and the fireflies and the stars, three layers of bright winking things that were similar yet different

Fireflies are funny, I found myself thinking Was it the male or female's ass that lit up? If Jeremy and I were fireflies, would I be talking in flashing ass-code to him or would he be dropping his pants and doing that to me? How many ass-flashes would it take to tell him he had pretty eyes or to ask him to kiss me?

Asses were funny, too Parker had grabbed mine hard when we'd fucked, but I was distracted by the pain of losing my virginity and only noticed my sore tushis later. How would Jeremy's hands feel on my ass? More gentle, I hoped I marveled at how sure I was that he'd be touching me there, and that I'd be touching him in similarly intimate places How would his skin feel? Would he be hairy or smooth? Would he like my ass or the rest of me when I was naked? Would the mole that looked like a third nipple bug him? Would he have more scars? How much of him was tattooed?

I looked over at him to find him looking back at me With him cross-legged on the ground and me in the chair, my head was higher than his. I wanted to kiss him like that—why did all these other people have to be around us? Didn't they have anything better to do?

Maybe he read that in my eyes. "Wanna go for a walk?"

"Yes, please "

He stood and held out his hand. I took it and he pulled me out of the chair, my body seeming to rise up at his touch. His hand in mine was rough, as I'd expect from someone always twisting a throttle, but also gentle, as I'd expect from someone who worked with delicate instruments. I could feel my palm sweating, but that was OK. For the second time, I wondered what his sweat would taste like.

Lily slid into the chair I'd vacated. I looked at her firelight-washed face and into her eyes, which were as dark and glittering as the sky, and felt guilty about leaving her with people she didn't know Maybe she read my thoughts, for she flashed that Cheshire Cat grin of hers. "Have fun checking out the woods. I'm going to stay here in the human world. I like it again, but might not if I went over there "

"You got cool hair," murmured Rabbit. "It's pretty."

I looked at him looking at her looking at the fire and should have been alarmed, but wasn't It would be all right Everybody was being cool.

Cool. That was what I wanted, someplace cool, away from the light and the warmth and the smoke that made my eyes burn. The shad-

owy wall of the woods looked inviting. We didn't need to go very far into the trees, out of sight but not out of earshot. We'd hear if things got rowdy, or if anyone started giving Lily shit.

JEREMY AND I DIDN'T TALK. I LET HIM GET AHEAD OF ME, then took his other hand, so he was walking in front of me with arms extended behind his back, pulling me after him. That way he could lead me along and I could keep looking at the sky, with no danger of tripping over stumps or stepping into holes. Away from the firelight the stars were even brighter and seemed closer than the dancing fireflies. An owl hooted and crickets sang, echoed by a deeper chorus of frogs. At the treeline he stopped but I kept walking until I bumped against his back. Letting go of his hands, I wrapped my arms tight around his waist. He chuckled and tried to turn around to face me, but I turned with him, giggling like a little kid. Behind us, I heard a car pulling off the dirt road and into the field, saw its headlights on the trees in front of us, but didn't care who was arriving.

Letting go of Jeremy's waist, I skipped into the woods, the high beams lighting my way. There wasn't much undergrowth, just the trunks of pine and maple, and these seemed to open like a twisting corridor in front of me, inviting me deeper into the forest. Resisting that, I had behind a thick pine and, as Jeremy caught up to me, grabbed his arm and pulled him around the other side of the trunk like we were hiding from a German searchlight in the sort of movie his motorcycle could have come from. The car's moth-flecked headlamps shone on either side of us and then went out. I heard its door slam and voices, but they seemed far away. What had Lily said about two worlds, one wrapped around the other? We were in the other one now and it contained nobody but us.

Where was Jeremy's face? There, that pale triangle right above mine, bending down. We bumped noses and pulled back, both laughing. He put his hands on my cheeks to guide our mouths together. I kissed him and tasted the pot and the beer but didn't mind either and tasted him, which I liked very much. It was a light kiss, both of us shy with our tongues, and we broke off after a moment. But not for long, we were soon feeling for each other's faces in the rustling pine-scented darkness, his hand stroking the back of my neck, my hand on his waist, slipping under his T-shirt to feel the small of his back, hooking the thumb of my other hand into a loop of his belt, our mouths separating to breathe.

A distant yell, high pitched but male, echoed through the trees. Then another voice, so faint I only understood the words seconds after I'd heard them, shouting "You fucking Chink bitch!" It sounded like a Salmonson, not Rabbit but his scary brother. Yelling at Lily.

I jumped up and winged forward and tripped over a root and went down, pine straw scratching my face and my ankle scraped raw on bark. "What the hell?" said Jeremy. I didn't explain, but staggered up again and ran dodging through the trees toward the distant fire.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck. That was the sound of my feet crunching on leaves, then pounding the bare soil when I broke out of the woods, Jeremy shouting as he crashed through the brambles behind me. The bonfire seemed very far away, like the clearing had grown while we were out of it. Dark forms were standing around the flames, none bulky enough to be either Salmonson brother or short enough to be Lily. Jeremy's long legs allowed him to catch up. "What is it?" he panted.

I didn't answer, but skidded to a halt just in time to avoid running straight into the bonfire. Rabbit was there after all, but lying on his back, Andy Beaver and Kristen or Kirsten squatting beside him and examining his arm, which was covered in ashes and blisters. "Where's Lily?" I said in a strangled gasp that would have been a shout if I'd had more wind.

"Bitch shoved me in the fire," moaned Rabbit.

"What did you do?" I snapped, looking frantically around for any sign of her.

"Just tried to get her to sit in my lap. Jesus it hurts."

"He grabbed her tit," said Sarah Jane Oxendine, looking both worried and angry, with the latter not apparently directed at Lily. Where the fuck was she?

"She must be really strong, or maybe she used kung fu or something," continued Sarah Jane. "Instead of Rabbit pulling her into his lap, she pulled him right out of that chair. He stumbled and put his arm out and it went in the fire."

"Shut up!" snarled Rabbit. "I never touched anything but her hand—I was just kidding with her. Somebody take me to the hospital. Where's my brother?"

Sarah Jane ignored him. "She looked really scared and took off running. Turtle had just gotten here and seen it all. He went chasing after her. I hope. I hope he doesn't hurt her."

"Dammit," said Rabbit. "should've stuck around to look after me! Plenty of time for other stuff later. Somebody else gonna drive me or do I have to do it one-handed?"

I didn't take my eyes off Sarah Jane. "Which way?" I asked as calmly as I could, hating her for sitting there and not doing anything. Turtle could have raped Lily by now.

She looked down at her feet but pointed to the woods on the other side of the clearing. I started in that direction, but Jeremy grabbed my arm and pulled me back. "Wait, I've got a flashlight." He ran toward his bike. "That way?" I asked Sarah Jane, just to be sure. She nodded. Oh, Lily, couldn't you at least have run toward me and Jeremy? There were no sounds coming from the woods. I tried not to think about Turtle's big hand clamped over her mouth. "And the rest of you just stood there and let him go chasing after her?" Nobody said anything. Fuckers.

"Somebody take me to the goddam hospital!" shouted Rabbit.

Jeremy was back with the flashlight. It was one of those big heavy ones you can use as a club. Good, but we'd wasted too much time. Jeremy beside me, I started into the woods. Behind us, Rabbit continued to moan. His burns hadn't looked so bad. Some vicious part of me wanted him to lose the arm. Turtle would lose worse if he did anything to my friend.

"Lily, are you there?" I shouted. "It's OK, we won't let him hurt you! Lily!"

Nothing but echo. Back in the clearing, a car started, which maybe meant someone was getting Rabbit to the hospital. "Turtle, you better not touch her!" I shouted with what was left of my voice. "If you do, I'll shoot you in the fucking face!" Dad didn't own a gun, but I'd get one somehow.

The trees were closer together on this side of the clearing and there was more undergrowth. Jeremy's flashlight picked out thick vines hanging down from the branches, going into the ground like roots. Still no sound but our footsteps on leaves. Lily might be able to move silently through the dark woods, but surely Turtle couldn't. *Please God,* I thought, *I'll believe in you if only you don't let the silence mean he's caught her.*

That's when I tripped over something. I felt a broad back, a big hand. Scrambling up, I pointed Jeremy's flashlight at my feet. It was Turtle, but I couldn't see his face. That didn't make sense. I was looking at his chest, his knees, the toes of his Reeboks, but the back of his head. "His neck," said Jeremy. What kind of strength could have twisted it like that, to turn his head all the way around like an owl's?

"He tried to hurt me," said Lily softly.

And then there she was, her top half torn off but still wearing her bra and jeans. Was that a smudge on her face or a bruise?

I stumbled to her and threw my arms around her. "Thank God!"

She didn't say anything, just stood like a statue. Her bare skin felt *different,* like before. "Lily?"

In the dark above us, something rustled, then whispered.

We might have ignored it if Lily hadn't looked up in that direction. Jeremy followed her gaze with the flashlight. Ten or fifteen feet up, something pale opened like a bud blossoming in the night, bigger than a magnolia bloom and spreading wider than a dinner plate. Shivering in the colorless glow, it kept expanding until a large moon-white face stared at us from the center of a huge flower with petals as fleshy as albino ears. It was inhumanly beautiful and inhumanly

smooth, yet at the same time seemed very old. There was intelligence in those eyes, which glistened like ripe black fruit, but its features formed no recognizable expression. Imagine one of the porcelain female masks found in Asian gift shops and restaurants, but big as an extra large pizza. As the quivering meaty petals fanned the air, I smelled something musky sweet that made me feel dizzier than the pot. The branches behind it rustled, as more white shapes unfolded in the dark, until there was a whole tree of blossoming faces, dozens or hundreds of them. Black lips wriggled as the white faces hissed and whispered at us.

No, not a tree, for it had two trunks, huge legs sheathed in folds of wrinkled bark, and what I'd thought were bare branches were its many, many gnarled arms and spidery, grasping hands. "Hello, Grandmother," said Lily softly.

She'd called it and it had come and killed him. Would it try to harm us or take her away?

I didn't want to find out. Grabbing Lily around the waist, I picked her up and spun around, putting her down pointing in the opposite direction. "Run!" I shouted. She showed no sign of hearing me. "Help." I gasped to Jeremy. That broke the spell that had paralyzed him. Mumbling something with a lot of Jesuses in it, he took one arm and I the other and we half shoved, half dragged her through the undergrowth. Behind us I heard treetrunk legs tearing free from earth and then an impossibly heavy *thump thump thump*. It was following us.

This was nightmare stuff, me running through the tangled woods with something huge crashing after me. Yet I felt less frightened than earlier, when I first realized Lily was missing and Turtle with her. That had been real, absolutely real, yet surely this wasn't. A giant walking tree of female faces couldn't be real.

Nor could green dogs and forest girls, yet I'd seen the Hound of the Hedges and heard Lily's story, which had been something I didn't disbelieve, but that didn't mean I truly believed it. Yet here was Grandmother Forest herself, clumping out of a Chinese fairy tale to take my friend away from me.

The fire was visible through the trunks that hemmed us in. I squeezed between them like bars, then pulled Lily after me, Jeremy's face pale over her pale bare shoulder as he pushed at her from behind. The trees that circled the Devil's Dancehall were shaking like a strong wind was blowing, but the air was still. I looked frantically past the fire, where somebody's car was pulling onto the access road, presumably carrying Rabbit to the hospital. Wheels, that was it; surely Grandmother Forest couldn't catch us if we made it to Jeremy's motorcycle.

Lily planted her heels and shook her arms and both Jeremy and I went tumbling onto the bare earth. How could she be so small and do that?

I picked myself up. She'd turned to face the tree line, where one of the tall, dark shapes now had two trunks and many pale blossoms. I scrambled to my feet and grabbed her arm again, but she might have been carved from granite. "Please," I begged her, "we have to get to Jeremy's bike. She won't be able to catch us then."

"No," said a voice that came from Lily's mouth but didn't sound like her. "I'm not going to leave with you. I called her and I'm going away with her. There's no way I can be a normal girl again, not with Turtle dead, and I wouldn't want to if I could."

At the edge of the woods, that dark shape swayed and rustled. I still felt no wind, but that's what it sounded like. Or maybe a hundred old Chinese women whispering.

Jeremy was still on his knees. "It's stopped following us," he said in the voice of a scared little boy.

"She can't cross the dead earth," said Lily, "although she can travel from woodland to woodland without being in the places in between. That's how she'll take me back with her." She started to walk back toward the trees and the taller thing that only looked like one.

"Lily, no! What happened was Turtle's fault, not yours." His and mine for having left her alone. "She killed him to save you, but that doesn't mean you have to go away with her."

She looked over her shoulder at me. "You don't understand. I only called her after I killed him, because I didn't want to live in your world anymore. Not even for you and Dad and certainly not for them." She pointed back toward the fire, where dark shapes stood stiffly against the orange glow. "The worst is, they would have let it happen to me. I thought I could be one of them, but maybe it's good that I'm not and never will be. So I'm going away. Please tell Dad I love him but I had to go someplace where people aren't and where I can be something they're not. Half of me is out there."

Then she turned back toward me and her face and voice were all Lily's again.

"God, Rachel, I'm so sorry. I'm leaving you to answer so many questions from cops and to tell my father his biggest fear is true, has always been true." Yes, that was a bruise under her eye and another one on her breast above the cup of her bra. "I don't know what's worse, me doing that to you or leaving him without saying goodbye. At least you get that much. Please don't hate me."

"Never." I mumbled, believing it all then and that belief a punch in the heart.

She came to me and hugged me, her grip strong but warm and human. "I love you." I told her I loved her back and hugged her very tight, something wet dripping off my face and down her neck. Then the human feel went out of her and she slipped from my arms, her pale face as distant as the moon. Jeremy still had his flashlight, which he shone on her departing back. Even in its cold beam, I could see the green in her hair.

She walked through the archway formed by Grandmother Forest's gnarled legs and into a darkness like a hole in the woods. As she disappeared, the figure that towered over her shuddered, its many arms thrashing like branches in a storm, and then was still. I held Jeremy's trembling hand, my face burning, then let go and walked slowly toward that huge inhuman thing, stopping a dozen feet away.

After a long time, he followed and touched my shoulder, although I could feel his fingers tremble and his voice quavered when he spoke. "Don't get too close." How brave he must be, to have stayed with me.

"Too late for that," I said, not meaning Grandmother Forest. No need for his warning, for Lily's guardian spirit had also left. "Look, it's just a tree now." Two of them, actually. His beam shone over the trunks and branches of an oak and maple that hadn't been there before but now leaned into one another, their upper branches all tangled up. Huge withered petals were falling around us. The few flowers still sprouting from the two trees were dead, the eyeless faces in their centers as crumbly as burnt paper. Come rain or wind and there'd be no trace.

I hugged Jeremy and felt him shake as he leaned into me. Unlike me, he had no way of understanding what he'd seen and I was grateful he hadn't gone catatonic. "What was that thing? Is it gone? Why wasn't Lily afraid of it?"

"It's family," I said.

"I don't understand," he mumbled. "But it will be OK." An hour ago it would have made me so happy, him trying to make me feel better. "The cops can find her when they come. She can't go too far, and if that thing is really gone then there's nothing in these woods that can hurt her."

"She's not in these woods anymore." I said dully. "She's gone with her grandmother, back across the world."

"I don't understand," he said again, "but I want to get you out of here, where nothing can hurt *you*."

"Nothing else can here," I said, my throat hurting despite having whispered. "I'll explain, but later. Please don't ask me about it right now. The thing that chased us is gone and we're safe and we have each other. That's all that matters."

I'd lied, like we do when we comfort other people. Not long ago I'd thought all I wanted was a cool boyfriend. I had that and it was good, but why did I have to give up something else? I'd never see her again and it hadn't really started hurting yet. Is that how we must go through life, always trading one thing for another? ❧

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THE OLD WOMAN and the MOON

SOMETIMES A SACRIFICE REQUIRES YOU TO DIG DEEP INTO YOURSELF, BUT SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO DIG DEEP INTO ANOTHER....

THE BEGINNING OF THE TALE IS ALWAYS IMPORTANT

A long time ago, long before even the wet bricks of Sumer were laid down and nobody had ever heard of Gilgamesh, a magician fell in love with the moon

The moon in those days had no seasons, did not wax or wane. Its light was constant throughout the night. It was this constancy that had first attracted the magician's love.

The moon felt the same and they carried their tryst over a decade until one day it was no longer enough. The magician vowed he would be with his love at all costs. He studied for years the inner flows of rivers and communed with cephalopods, observed the clockwork mechanisms of the stars, and discussed the task with the tides. After he had sufficiently prepared himself, and under the face of the full and constant moon, he climbed a tall mountain and cast his spell. For three days, he wrestled with the sky and the sun. When he awoke, the top of the mountain had been sheared off as if cut by a great knife. The forest had been broken and flattened in all directions as far as the eye could see. The night sky was clear but empty. The moon was nestled in the crook of his shoulder, smiling and asleep.

BY STEVEN POLKES • ILLUSTRATION BY JESSE GUAY

Middles are often confused, weak, and too long, but this one is easily told.

Without the softening effect of the moon, the ascendant sun's harsh light brought the world under terrible scrutiny. Kindness became enlightened self-interest. Altruism grew rare and unexpected. Morality descended to the terms of the marketplace. Music transformed into war chants, and murder in the name of the state became the highest possible honor.

The nights varied between pitch black and unrehevedly dim. The distance between towns was determined by how long one could travel in the pitiless light of the sun, for the night was feared as merely the means of evil opportunity

In time, in generations, the moon was forgotten. It stayed forgotten for over a thousand years.

THE END OF EVERY TALE IS ABOUT A PERSON OR IT ISN'T WORTH A damn. The end of this story is about a woman named Nichiva.

Nichiva came out of the woods on the north side of the mountain. The trail turned west, following the ledge all the way down into the valley. She stopped to rest and admired the view. Her leg still ached, barely healed, and her head still hurt. The sun was hot and the air utterly clear. It was spring and the trail had been littered with piles of soft, slushy snow. Here, it was as dry as old leather.

Below her, she could see a piece of weak green earth surrounded by desert. She knew it well. It was where she had been born.

Nichiva had no last name. In the custom of the village, only male offspring rated that luxury and then only if they were of the propertied class. Her parents were unremarkable farmers of potatoes. The mountains were gray, and when the wind blew from the south, great clouds of dust rolled down their flanks. Nichiva was born in their shadow.

She grew up stocky and short and her features looked as if they had been carved into her face with a putty knife. The young Nichiva resembled the adult Nichiva in all but size. But she was born strong and grew stronger. By the time she was fifteen she was doing more work on the farm than her father, biding her time until she could figure out how to leave.

There was no chance the farm would be left to her—women did not have such options. Nichiva knew this. Nor would she be able to find a man better than her father in the village. Those few opportunities went to more attractive girls. Nichiva made other plans. She learned how to use a quarterstaff and a knife from a traveling soldier and paid for it with her virginity.

The sun was uncomfortably warm. She shrugged off her jacket and tied it to her belt. Being dressed as a man had its advantages. The looser clothing and shorter hair were much cooler in the desert morning.

She rubbed her leg again and reluctantly resumed walking. The trail proceeded downward, keeping a respectful distance from the ledge. This was not a trail meant for sightseeing, but for travel. People who spent a lot of time looking over cliffs to the distant Mesas sometimes fell off. Or were pushed. She kept a close eye on the forest as the trail descended.

THE FACE OF THE PRIEST PAINTED ON THE GATE WAS NOT MOR'S, THE priest of the village when she had left. Her family's farm had gone fallow. After she had traded for enough supplies to go farther, Nichiva found her mother working as a cleaner in the temple brothel off the center common. Haymee looked much older than Nichiva remembered.

The old woman didn't look up as Nichiva entered the room. She was on her hands and knees, scrubbing the stone floor. Nichiva pulled down her hood and shook out her hair so she would be more recognizable.

"Mother?" Nichiva called.

Haymee stopped and looked back suspiciously. "Who are you?"

"Nichiva."

"Nichiva is dead. Don't be fooling an old woman."

"I'm not dead." She clutched her staff tightly. She had replayed this moment many times in her mind but this was not one of the scenarios. "Not yet, anyway."

Haymee sat on a bench against the wall and let out a long breath. "What did you come back here for?"

"I'm traveling north. I thought I'd visit for a bit."

Haymee nodded. "Your father's dead. Died in the fields. I expect you knew that."

Nichiva didn't. "I saw the farm was gone."

"Part of Dilli's new temple estates." Haymee snorted, then sighed. "Ah, your father. The old man was missed."

Nichiva stared at her mother. "Why do you say that? You hated him."

"Don't speak ill of the dead. They might come for you."

"What happened to Mor?" asked Nichiva to change the subject.

"Too much of a gambler." Haymee spit on the floor, then rubbed it with her foot before anyone could see. "Gambled away his inheritance, all of his wives, and the entire town to Dilli in a dog race. We strangled him on the rack before Dilli came and took over."

Nichiva didn't reply. Mor had gambled on her. After she had found out she was pregnant, she had gone to Mor. It was common knowledge he sent secret packages to Bridge City. She had offered to take one at half price. Then, she had stolen enough money from her father to purchase drugs and food, saving the money she received from Mor for the future, and ran. In the mountains, she purged herself of the child and buried its remains in the sand stone, rested a few days, and continued on.

Her mother gave her a sidelong glance. "So. You like looking like a man? Is that what you're about nowadays?"

Nichiva scowled at her. "Don't be like that. It's better not to look like a woman on the road."

Haymee cackled. "I bet. Is that how you earn a living in the city? Looking like a man?"

"Shut up," Nichiva said. "I'm a courier. I take packages from one part of the city to another."

"This is a long way from the city."

"I have something to deliver north. To Isleta."

Haymee frowned. "Over on Rattlesnake Mesa? Don't go there. I've heard stories of that place."

Nichiva shrugged. "I'd best be going."

"You wouldn't go without a present for your old ma, would you?"

Nichiva searched her robe. "I've got some of the tokens they use in the city. I don't know if they're good for anything here."

She could tell by Haymee's expression they were good for something and handed them to her mother. Nichiva didn't think she would need them.

Haymee weighed the pouch in her hand and looked suddenly crafty. "You don't want to go on, girl. Stay here with me. Between the two of us we could do pretty well."

Nichiva knew what Haymee had in mind and decided she'd given enough to her mother.

"I've got to go."

"Get on with you, then," shouted her mother. "Get on and leave me here. We didn't want you. Remember that. We put three girls out on the cliff before you because we wanted a boy. We only kept you because we were desperate."

THERE WAS NOTHING LEFT OF THE HOUSE BUT A SHALLOW DEPRESsion. The barn fared better. In the shadow of a clay wall, she watched the sunset. She set the water and supplies she had bought on the ground and sat down, leaned back against the wall. The sun had left some warmth in the wall behind her and she could feel it pleasantly against her back. She pulled her robe close around her against the chill desert air.

She should have just gotten the needed water and supplies and gone on instead of looking for Haymee. What else could she have expected? Her mother's words left a dull ache. Nichiva wondered if she could have done things differently. She might have worked pretty hard to get Haymee to at least like her, if Haymee had given her a chance. She huddled in her robe and leaned her cheek against her knee. In time, she knew, the ache would cease to trouble her, but for the moment it beat along

with her heart and her leg

There was light across the sky and the land until the sun disappeared below the horizon. The dark came suddenly without any lingering glow or shadows. The stars leaped out and night fell all around her. The land became a picture of layered shadows.

Nichiva lay down and huddled in her robe, trying to sleep.

She heard a noise from down the hill.

Nichiva tensed but did not otherwise move. It came again, the sound of a rolling pebble against rock. Someone was coming.

Nichiva slipped away from the wall into the brush. She wished she could take off her boots and walk silently barefoot, but the first cactus or snake she encountered would give her away.

"The old hag said she'd hang around the farm," she heard one man whisper.

"There's nothing left of the farm," grunted another. "Try the barn."

She could hear their breathing now. In a moment, they would reach the barn. The starlight wasn't much to see by, but it would show them her gear. She circled, keeping the barn between her and the voices. One would lean down to check. Maybe both of them. They wouldn't strike a light until they knew she wasn't there.

She crept silently to the back of the clay wall. At one point, her ankle turned on a stone and the pain in her leg went right up her back. She stopped and rubbed her leg. Had she broken it again? After a moment, the pain eased. No, it was just still tender.

Nichiva could hear them on the other side. Maybe they'll just go away. Nichiva crawled to the edge of the wall, eased around the edge until she was near them. Maybe they'd just go on.

"The old lady said she was carrying a package. That's got to be worth something."

So much for being left alone. If I can get the first one, then maybe I'll have a chance with the second. She remembered her soldier's voice: just figure out where the first one is and pick your target.

"Hey. Here's her stuff."

Nichiva drove the end of the staff where she thought a head might be. Something thin broke and she heard a body falling. Then, she retreated.

"Bek!" cried the other voice.

She swung the staff at knee level but her leg turned again and the pain made her slip. The staff caught something solid and she realized she had hit the fallen man but not the one still standing. Frantically, she pulled back the staff but he grabbed it and yanked Nichiva forward into the dirt. In the dark, something rushed toward her face. Light exploded and for a long moment her body felt disconnected from itself.

"Bitch!" cried someone from a long way off. He kicked her stomach.

She heard a roar and felt a spattering of rain, but it was unimportant. The world contracted around breathing. Inhalation was an act of will. Vomiting was involuntary.

After a while, breath came on its own and her stomach was quiet. She looked around. One body she recognized from its position—that was the one she had hit first. The other was lying near her. The ground was wet and sticky. In the dark, she heard a low mutter, then a crunch and chewing.

Nichiva turned slowly toward the sound. The jaguar was watching her as it ate.

It chewed some more and swallowed. Then it bit something off the man and swallowed.

She backed away and came up against the barn. Nichiva couldn't see its eyes, but she could feel its gaze follow her.

The rattle of the jaguar's purr filled the air.

She grabbed her gear and backed slowly down the hill. The jaguar watched her the entire time.

By dawn, Nichiva was too tired to walk any farther. The trail followed a dry arroyo lined with ancient live oaks. If there had been a trace of water in the streambed she would have washed off the blood. As it was, she scoured off what she could with dirt. The oaks towered over her and gave her a withered shade from the sun. She climbed up as far as she could. She knew it was no protection against the jaguar, but she hoped it was well fed.

"I've killed another man," she said aloud as she sat on the branch. That should mean something. It bothered her obscurely that it didn't.

Nichiva slept through the heat of the day into the cool of the evening. When she awoke she ate from her pack and drank deeply from her water bag. Although she was still shaky from the beating, she felt much better. It was just after dusk and some clouds reflected a little light back to the earth.

She had never come this far north before. The desert was milder, with bushes and cottonwoods as well as the oaks. There had to be underground water here. It was clearly better land than where she had grown up. She wondered why there were no farms.

The night deepened. Beneath the leaves it became completely dark.

She would reach Isleta sometime tomorrow. Lying there, her back against the broad broken curve of the oak, Nichiva wondered if she could turn back. She had already gotten more than she had bargained for. Bridge City was already closed to her. She'd been scorned by her mother, then sold out to thugs and beaten. The village was closed to her. Maybe that was reason enough to quit. A jaguar had saved her life. A good or a bad omen? If she didn't go on to Isleta, where could she go?

> LONG, THICK BLADES OF GRASS CURLED OVER THE GROUND LIKE THICK ROPE RUGS. TALL YELLOW AND PURPLE FLOWERS CLUSTERED UP REGULARLY AS IF FLOATING ON A GREEN LAKE.

"I see you," came a man's voice below her.

Nichiva sat up and nearly fell from the branch.

"Don't fall," said the voice. "I mean you no harm."

"Who are you?"

"I am Nebethee."

She laughed shortly. "Nebethee is a story to frighten children. The creature in the corner. The thing in the rafters. It doesn't exist."

"I am to take you to Isleta," Nebethee said, ignoring her. "Come down."

"Why come get me now? In the dark? Why not come in the light?"

Nebethee was silent a moment. "My master thought I might frighten you in the daylight. The night is kinder to me."

"What is your master to me?"

"It was my master who sent word to Oom for a package to be brought by a woman. You are that woman. You carry that package."

Nichiva tried to think of something else to ask. Something to reassure her. The voice was soft and soothing but sibilant, as if the speaker spoke with a pebble in his mouth.

"Why come tonight, then? Why not wait for me to get there tomorrow."

"My master has need of you tonight."

"Why?"

"He has his reasons. Please."

Nichiva didn't speak for a moment. "I think I will stay right here, thank you."

The voice paused. "I can't climb up to get you, but I think I can pull down this tree. I don't want to do that. You might get hurt."

"You're bluffing."

A moment passed, then the entire tree started to sway.

"All right." Nichiva decided to change her plans. She looked around her. "I can't see anything."

"You are not very high. Feel your way down and I will help. If you fall, I will catch you."

Nichiva eased back to the trunk, slipped but was steadied by what felt like an enormous, soft hand.

The hand drew her down onto a travois.

"Rest here," said Nebethee. "Don't look at me if you can help it."

Nebethee ran and dragged the travois quickly along. Out from under the oaks she could see the shifting bulk of him but no details. It seemed to her he moved like an athlete burdened with sacks of water. They moved with him and against him. Several times he shifted his balance in strange ways. The wind of their passing burned her eyes and she had to hold on tightly to keep from falling off. She looked around and saw a coyote running alongside her. Nebethee didn't seem to notice.

It watched her.

Nebethee shouted and the coyote ran up the hill, but Nichiva could still hear him running, pacing her in the dark.

In minutes, they had reached the top of the Mesa. Nearby there were the firelights of houses. Perhaps Isleta was a village and not just a collection of huts.

Nebethee stopped before one large home. "Here is my master. I may see you again." With that, he melted into the night.

Nichiva knocked on the door.

An old woman answered. Her face, illuminated by the lamp, was ancient and lined, with deep-set eyes and a broad mouth. She smiled warmly. Hesitantly, Nichiva smiled awkwardly in return.

"You must be Nichiva," she said kindly. "I am Dineh."

"Nebethee brought me ..." Nichiva started, but stopped herself.

Dineh nodded. "Poor man. You are here to see my husband, Mutavilya. Let me bring you to him."

MUTAVILYA LAY ON THE BED. HE SMILED BRIEFLY WHEN INTRODUCED.

"Can you leave us alone, Dineh?" he said gently to his wife.

Dineh nodded, kissed her husband, and left the room.

Mutavilya watched her go, then turned to Nichiva. "Oom sent me something."

Nichiva nodded. "Herbs, I think. Something to ease the pain, I suppose."

Mutavilya laughed. "Oh, it will do that right enough. Give them to me."

Nichiva gave him the pouch. His hands were wracked by a sudden palsy and she had to help him open it.

"Careful," he said. "Careful. Don't touch it or spill a crumb. This is dangerous stuff."

Once she had opened the pouch, Mutavilya carefully sniffed the contents and rubbed a bit of it between his fingers.

"I thought it was dangerous stuff," she said dryly.

"Not to me." He laughed again. "Put it on the shelf over there. Would you like some tea?"

"Not that kind."

"It would be a waste to give you any. No. Regular tea. I'll have Nebethee bring some if you like."

"I suppose."

Mutavilya nodded, called softly in a language she did not know. Nichiva heard a rumbling voice respond. After a few minutes, Nebethee bowed and came in through the door with two steaming cups. Nichiva stared at him, not knowing what to say.

Nebethee had been a big man once. His head brushed the rafters. But he had grown since then. Damp bags of flesh hung from his face, belly, and arms. His legs were swollen like pudding. She could not see his feet beneath the flesh of his ankles. His strength was obvious in the way he moved and in the fact he moved at all.

He stopped and let her look at him until she came to herself and looked away.

"It's all right. I'm used to it," he said and brought the cups to them. The big mug he sat next to the package of herbs. After he had given her the smaller cup, he added the herbs to the mug and stirred it slowly.

"It's dangerous stuff," she said suddenly, concerned for him.

"Not to me."

Nichiva looked at Mutavilya. "What is that stuff?"

"Poison, dear," said Mutavilya. "A very powerful poison. I have lived long enough and I will die tonight." He reached out and touched Nebethee's hand. "You will be released by morning."

Nebethee nodded and gently helped the old man with the mug. It took a long time for Mutavilya to get his breath after he drank the mug's contents. He lay back down and rested for a while. Nebethee sat in the corner of the room.

"What happened to him?" she asked Mutavilya.

"He has lived too long." He pointed at Nebethee. "Take it as a lesson. Don't live forever. Drink your tea."

"You look better than he does."

"Ah. Dineh kept me alive and she is a very pure and wonderful thing. I would do anything for her. Nebethee was kept alive by me. I am not so pure nor very wonderful. Still, he would do anything for me." He looked at her across his mug. "I have a task for you."

"What's the task?"

He pointed to her. "*You* must take Dineh home."

"Where does she live?" Nichiva sipped her tea. It was very good and she drank half the cup.

"A long way away. But you won't have to go far. Only to the other side of the Mesa."

"I don't know the Mesa."

"You will know the place when you see it."

She grew drowsy. "What's in it for me?"

"The whole world."

She laughed. With Bridge City and the village of her birth closed to her, the whole world was not much of an incentive.

Nichiva found it impossible to keep her eyes open, so she closed them. She felt perfectly awake, however. All through the night Mutavilya seemed to drone on and on, talking soft and low. She listened until dawn. Her mind felt as clear as water and she knew she would remember his words forever.

NICHIVA AWOKE LYING IN MUTAVILYA'S BED, ALONE. SLEEPING IN A dead man's bed! She jumped out and steadied herself against the wall.

Dead man's bed? Was Mutavilya dead? She had only a vague recollection of the previous night.

Outside the room she heard a low, mourning chant.

Dineh was sitting on the front step, singing to herself. A little ways off the two biers were still smoldering, one much larger than the other. Nebethee and Mutavilya.

Nichiva recognized Dineh's song. Mor the priest sang it at funerals when she was a child.

Don't come back today
You have to go away
This was your home when you were here
But that was yesterday and now it's gone
We won't forget you but you can't stay
You have to go away
Don't come back today

Mor had sung it in a shrill and frightening dirge. Nichiva remembered it had scared her silly. Dineh sang it gently, as if she were reassuring a child against the dark or the thunder. The salt stains

of tears lined the creases in her cheeks.

Nichiva was unsure how to interrupt her. All she could see in the doorway was Dineh's back. "Dineh?" Nichiva called softly.

Dineh finished the song and shook her head. She blew her nose and wiped her face with her dress. "It's over," she said, ignoring Nichiva. "I've been visiting a long time but now it's done. It's time for you to go on. I got to go, too." She made a shooing motion toward the west, brushed herself off, and stood. She turned to Nichiva. "There, dear. I've been keeping myself busy while I waited for you. Come on outside."

The Mesa in daylight was a glorious green. Nichiva had never seen such a broad, bright expanse of the color in her life. Her village had been a drab and dry place; every scrap of growth had been paid for in hours of sweat. Bridge City, though it stood on the edge of a river, was less dry but no less drab. Here, the green seemed a gift freely given.

Long, thick blades of grass curled over the ground like thick rope rugs. Tall yellow and purple flowers clustered up regularly as if floating on a green lake. The reflected green light repainted the whitewashed wall of the house, tinted Dineh's face, colored the shadows.

Nichiva took off her shoes and walked on the grass. It was long and tickled her knees.

"You like my Mesa, then," said Dineh, with a shy smile.

Nichiva realized she was grinning and covered her mouth. "It's very. Yes. I like it very much."

"Good. I could only touch a few things here." Dineh looked at the grass sadly.

"Why is it *your* Mesa?"

Dineh gestured to the grass. "Without me none of this would be here."

Nichiva tactfully looked away. Her feet felt too good to argue.

"Come on, then." Dineh rose slowly. "Time to move on."

Nichiva sat and put her boots back on. "Do you know the way?"

"Through the village first." Dineh stretched and rubbed the small of her back. "Then, north. I think Mutavilya said you would know the place when we found it."

Yes, Nichiva thought to herself, remembering a little of the night before. He said that to me, too, without much clarification. Even if it were true it would be nice not to waste too much time. Nichiva shrugged. She was in no hurry.

Mutavilya's house faced the road that ascended the Mesa from the valley. They turned the corner of the house and a crowd waited for them.

They were quiet, standing still with bundles at their feet. When they saw Dineh, each face lit up from sadness. They approached her, one by one, shook her hand, hugged her or kissed her, murmured good-bye. Nichiva followed Dineh slowly. Dineh didn't breeze through the crowd as Nichiva had expected. She stopped and talked with each person, chatting with a stooped woman about tomatoes, discussing the jaguars with another. Nichiva could see Dineh knew each of these people intimately. She spoke with them warmly, comfortably, about things that were important to them.

Nichiva grew impatient. Dineh ignored her.

Nichiva found herself furious without knowing why. It was all she could do to keep from stalking down the road as if she were two years old. She moved out of the crowd and leaned against the side of Mutavilya's house, watching Dineh move through the crowd.

What is wrong with me? Nichiva thought. She had all the time in the world. There was nowhere she had to go. Yet she was so angry her hands were shaking.

"She has that effect on people," came a voice beside her.

Nichiva turned. There was an ancient dark man standing next to her, wrapped in a blanket even though the morning air was warm. He had shaved his head in the sign of mourning. There was a bundle at his feet. Nichiva nodded uncertainly, not sure how to address him.

"Oh, don't worry," he said in exasperation. "No one's dead yet. Except Mutavilya, of course. And Nebethee. But I don't mourn them. I'm Mastamho."

"I am Nichiva."

He looked at the crowd. "It's not my turn, yet. You're taking her away?"

"I'm helping her go home."

Mastamho searched her face for a long minute. He turned away with a snort. "As if you knew where that was. Or what she is, for that matter. That's why Mutavilya sent for you. None of us would do it."

"Maybe I shouldn't."

Mastamho shook his head. "Oh, it's got to be done. Everyone is lost without the light. That's the hell of it. We don't want to do it, but it's still got to be done."

"Why don't you want to do it?"

He stared at her. "Are you daft, girl? Even if you don't know who she is, you've got to understand how different this Mesa is. Haven't you even seen it? The grass? The flowers? The water? She draws the water to herself—it shouldn't be here. When she goes, the water will fall away and then where will we be?"

Nichiva stared at him.

Mastamho snorted. "Far away from here with any luck."

Nichiva shook her head in confusion. "Who is she?"

Mastamho looked down in sudden embarrassment.

Nichiva faced Mastamho. "Why won't anybody talk about her straight out? Who is she?"

Mastamho looked away and seemed about to speak but Dineh beamed at him through the crowd. "I can't talk about it now," he said eagerly. "It's my turn."

He walked over to Dineh. They stared at one another silently for a moment. Then, they hugged each other. Mastamho cried as if his heart was broken.

NICHIVA REMEMBERED THE LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS, DEEP IN HER BONES. SHE HAD NEVER SEEN IT, BUT SHE KNEW WHAT IT LOOKED LIKE, HOW IT BROUGHT FORM OUT OF THE NIGHT.

NICHIVA WALKED ON INTO ISLETA. IT WAS BUILT ALONG A CENTRAL road that sprang up fully grown from the other side of Mutavilya's house—clean, windswept, and filled with light. All of the houses had been whitewashed. They seemed to glow in the desert sun. The intense green surrounding the village made the white houses pulse with illusory color.

The houses were empty. Nichiva realized the people were leaving the village. They had bundled up their belongings the night before and were only waiting to see Dineh before they left. Who was Dineh that, when she left, a whole village would pack up and leave the prettiest land Nichiva had ever seen? It must have been a nice place to live, she thought. Green land. Good crops. Plenty of water. The houses had those little touches that only came from idle time. Tiny carvings graced their lintels and doors. Someone had painted a pair of tiny, humorous eyes along the foot of one house, as if a small, gentle creature were peering through the wall

at her and smiling. Nichiva wished she could see the village occupied, humming with the activity it clearly once had. She wished she had been born there

NICHIVA WAITED FOR DINEH JUST OUTSIDE THE VILLAGE, WHERE THE road disappeared into the grass of the Mesa. Silently, they walked on through the grass, paced by a herd of small deer in the distance. The sun seemed cooler up here. Dineh looked happy to be on her way at last. Nichiva felt as if she were drowning.

They stopped at midday in a small copse of trees. Nichiva mechanically broke some bread and fruit she had packed back at Mutavilya's house. Dineh ate slowly and sparingly. She looked around for a bit and then up the tree.

"There you are!" she exclaimed suddenly. "Come on down here."

A jaguar, hidden in the leaves, dropped from the branches, came over to Dineh, rubbed his cheek against her knee and purred.

Nichiva froze. She looked for blood on its muzzle. Was it the jaguar that had saved her life a few nights ago?

Dineh caught her expression. "Oh, don't worry about him. He's an old friend. Aren't you, boy?" She rubbed the jaguar's ears and he licked her face.

"Who are you?" Nichiva shook her head.

"I'm the moon, dear. Didn't Mutavilya tell you?"

"No. What's the moon?"

She held the jaguar's head and squeezed his cheeks. "Oh, *he* knows, don't you? I'm the big light in the night sky. I'm the one-eyed maiden. I'm the little sun. I'm the silver woman and the bringer of water. You miss me, don't you boy?"

"What are you talking about?"

Dineh released the jaguar and he rested his head in her lap. "Oh, people know who I am but they've forgotten what they know. People are like that. The animals and the plants know it in their hearts. But people can't track anything that's not in their face every day. Take something away and in a generation or two it's even gone from the language." She looked up at Nichiva. "You'll know me when you see me in my home again."

"I'm sending you to the sky?"

"That's what Mutavilya told me."

"Why me?"

"I don't know. He must have thought you were something special." Dineh leaned back against the tree. "It's time I got back. I've been gone a long time." She spit on the ground. "Just look at what's come of everything. The world needs me, doesn't it?" She sounded doubtful.

"I suppose," Nichiva said guardedly.

"Mutavilya tried to send me home several times, but he was never quite able to manage it. He said he had figured it out just before he died. He said you could do it."

"Did he say how I was supposed to do this?"

"Not a word." Dineh smiled and looked up into the tree leaves. "I am going to miss this place." She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

"Great." Nichiva rubbed her aching leg. Dineh was crazy. What am I doing here?

"WHERE DO YOU COME FROM, CHILD?" ASKED DINEH AFTER A LONG hours' silent walk.

"Bridge City."

"You're not from there originally, though."

Nichiva pointed south. "The little village on the road, below the ridge."

Dineh pursed her lips. "Hard people over there. It must have been a hard place to grow up."

Nichiva stopped and stared at her. "Yes," she said, surprising herself. "Yes, it was."

Dineh smiled and patted her shoulder. "Don't worry about it now. You don't have to go back there ever again if you don't want to."

Nichiva felt suddenly weightless. "You're right," she said wonderingly. "I don't." She shook her head. "How did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Do—" She didn't know how to describe it. "Say something I needed to hear."

"Oh, Nichiva," Dineh laughed. "It's written all over you." Dineh started walking again.

"It is?"

"Of course it is. You're a simple girl. Now, Mutavilya. He was complicated and full of secrets. It took me a long time to understand him."

Nichiva didn't answer, following her. Dineh looked at her speculatively. "But there's more. You left your village for the city. Why did you come back?"

Nichiva looked at the ground.

"You can't return, then. Eh?"

Nichiva nodded.

"Why?"

Nichiva felt her throat stop. She couldn't speak for a moment. "I left my village because there was nothing there," she said at last. "In Bridge City I had this little room above the market. It was badly lit. I could never escape the smell of the fish. But it had a window that looked down on the bridge that crossed the river. It was my room. I could see people coming and going. I could see the water cut through the little canyon. I worked like a dog to keep that little room. I took packages for Oom anywhere he wanted just so I could keep it."

She picked up a handful of dirt and let it dribble down to the ground. "Bridge City is like anywhere else. I had claim to that room only as long as somebody more important didn't want it. A day came when a priest needed a spot to watch the new toll house. He came into my room and looked around. He didn't see me. He didn't see my things. He only saw the room was on the second floor and had a good window. He gave the order and suddenly my little room wasn't mine anymore." Nichiva didn't speak for a minute. She picked up her staff. "My soldier taught me to use this. I wanted to learn because a woman is killed on sight if she dares to carry a sword or a club. I needed some kind of protection. But I never had to use it—it was an invisible knife in my pocket nobody knew I had. I was just a woman with a walking stick. Now, I've used it twice." Nichiva chuckled dryly. "I didn't mean to do anything to him. I just wanted to plead with him about my little room. He didn't even glance at me. He just pushed me away and his guards started toward me. Instead, I hit him." She brought the point of the staff down hard into the ground. The earth rang softly. "And he died."

Nichiva drew a long, deep breath. "The guards tossed me over the bridge. I don't think they even knew I'd killed the priest. It was enough I'd struck him."

Nichiva brushed the last of the dirt from her hands, rubbed her hands clean on her robe. "Tossed me right out in the middle. The water is really vicious there. It pounds on the rocks. You can feel it in the bridge even though it's a fair way down."

Dineh took her hand. "What happened then?"

Dineh's hand was warm. Nichiva held it tightly. "I woke up in Oom's house. My leg was broken. My head was bandaged. I was surprised to be alive. Oom said people in Bridge City don't like murderers, but they didn't know I was there. I was going to have to leave soon whether I got better or not. I got better enough, I guess. I only killed one more to get here but he was going to kill me, so that makes it alright." She shook her head. "Oom said he had something for me to deliver and I had no other place to go."

AS THEY WALKED, DINEH SHOWED OFF HER MESA LIKE A MOTHER showing off her favorite daughter. When the food ran out, Dineh brought Nichiva down to a shallow lake and they feasted on rice and wild onions. The lake had no fish, but it did have frogs. Dineh

showed her a spot on the edge of the reeds where there was a salt lick. They dug some out to spice up the frogs. The deer patiently waited for them to finish. Dineh wouldn't let Nichiva kill any deer, even though the meat would have been tasty.

"I have a soft spot for deer," she confided. "They're going to have a tough time of it after I'm gone." She raised her hands over her head and danced in a circle. "But just look at this place. Just look at what I did."

Dineh liked to talk. She talked to the trees, the birds, the frogs. The jaguar made an occasional appearance when they stopped and Dineh talked to him. She loved stories. Nichiva found herself telling Dineh about looting the bodies that had fallen from the cliff over the village when she was small and growing the corn with her father. Dineh listened. Nichiva told her how her father had grown uneasy as she grew older and had taken it out on her mother, and as she spoke the ache of watching her father beat her mother blended with the ache her mother's words had left within her. Dineh listened. She told Dineh about her nameless soldier. How the first painful and bloody grappling had later turned into a comforting embrace. How she had felt when he left and when she found she was pregnant by him. How she had staked her life on Mor's penchant for gambling and how his gambling had taken him in the end. Dineh listened.

Dineh's stories were much deeper tapestries than her own. Soft stories about children she had watched grow up, future promises kept, future promises broken. Poignant stories about men and women who found each other and stayed together against terrible odds and in frightening times. Dramatic tales of imperial intrigue and fallen princes. Nichiva thought her own life a paltry and simple thing compared to Dineh's stories. Dineh didn't think so.

As they walked together, Nichiva felt as if a soft light were shining down on her. She now understood the people of Isleta. She understood Mutavilya and the jaguar. All these years, she thought. What have we been missing?

THEY CAME TO THE NORTHERN EDGE OF THE MESA. THERE WAS A broad, flat rock near the edge. They climbed it and sat down, looking down on the river flowing below them. The light changed the color of the desert from gold and bronze to purple and red. The land glowed from within like a lamp.

Here, thought Nichiva with sudden and unexpected certainty. Here.

Nichiva rummaged in her pack for something to eat and felt a leather parcel with her fingers. She pulled it out slowly, wondering what it was. It must have been here all along. She wondered why she hadn't found it before. *You'll find it when you need it.* She looked up and thought for a moment she had heard Mutavilya's voice.

Dineh glanced over and saw the parcel in her hands. "What's that?"

Nichiva squeezed the leather parcel. It felt as if there were utensils or tools inside. "I'm not sure." On impulse, she put it back. "I'll look at it later."

Dineh nodded. The light was fading and the colors were deepening as the stars came out. Dineh took Nichiva's hand and they watched the sunset.

"You know," said Dineh. "This is the spot I came down."

"It is?"

Dineh nodded. "This was a hill, then. Mutavilya brought me down and it knocked the top of the mountain flat." She chuckled. "Dry as dust, then. Soon as I woke up I figured I'd change that." Dineh nudged Nichiva. "Did a good job, too."

Nichiva nodded and silence fell between them as they watched the stars.

"I wish you had been my mother," Nichiva said quietly.

Dineh didn't answer immediately, but thought it over. "Me, too," she said at last.

Nichiva smiled and felt as if she had walked into a room filled with light, as if every shadow in her had been dispelled.

"You know," Dineh said softly. "Maybe I won't go after all. This is awfully nice."

Nichiva's heart leaped and went cold at the same time. "What happens to the world?"

"Just the same, I guess." Dineh shook her head. "Just the same."

When the sun was gone and the stars were fully out, they built a small fire and ate. Dineh wrapped herself in her robe and fell asleep immediately as usual. Nichiva felt awkward and hesitant.

I could take her away. She could be with me. Mutavilya had her with him for years. Is it so wrong for me to have her to myself for a little while?

Nichiva could only remember the fall into the canyon. She could never remember striking the water. As she had fallen it had felt for a moment like she had finally done something real and true. It had felt like flying. When she awoke at Oom's house, her first feeling was a wave of disappointment.

If I can send Dineh back, I can change the world. This is what Mutavilya meant. Everyone is lost without the light.

All right. Here is the place. Now is the time. She thought. All right. Now what?

Nichiva brought out the parcel and unwrapped it in the light of the fire. In it were different sorts of knives. Long ones. Short ones. Knives with short, fat blades. Knives with long, thin blades. Curved knives. Straight knives. Knives with hooks. She turned them familiarly over in her hand, the memory of what Mutavilya had told her that night finally coming clear.

I can't do it, Mutavilya had said to her. *I know what needs to be done but I am weak. I love her too much.*

She needs to go home. You know how much we need her back. You can feel it. But you don't feel for her like I do. You can do it. You've done it before.

Herbs and his long droning voice. That was how he had done it. She touched the cold metal.

Nichiva remembered the light in the darkness, deep in her bones. She had never seen it, but she knew what it looked like: how it brought form out of the night. She brought up one wickedly curved blade. She knew exactly what it was for.

She can't die so she can't leave on her own. It's too hard for her to give all this up. She has to be persuaded.

Everyone was lost without the light. Every living thing cried out for it, Nichiva included. Nichiva rummaged further in her pack and found the rope.

It must be done willingly. I can't force you. But you can see how it needs to be done, can't you?

What will you do for her, Nichiva? she said to herself. Will you do it this time for love?

HER HANDS BLOODY TO THE ELBOWS, SHE KNELT NEXT TO THE ROCK. The grass felt cool and moist as it caressed her legs. Her face was bloody where she rubbed it with her hands, her hair was matted, her clothes stiff.

She looked up. In the east came a faint glow. She laughed softly. Tears came down her cheeks. She beat her fist on the grass. Light broke over the eastern mountains and spilled over her.

The moon rose.

THERE ARE TWO ENDINGS TO NICHIVA'S STORY.

When the moon returned it was no longer constant as it had been. It waxed and waned in a regular cycle. In one version of the tale, we are seeing Dineh's face, turning to follow Nichiva safely across the world, always watching over the woman who sent her home.

The second version is similar. In that version, Nichiva always pursues the moon, and Dineh, unforgiving of what Nichiva has done, continually turns her face away.

KING ORFEIGH

While this is based on the medieval tale of Sir Orfeo, you may recognize its source as one far older —

Y

fading into the dark

By Ruth Nestvold — Illustration by Paul Lee

YOU HAVE BEEN FIGHTING FOR A GLIMPSE OF her for years, have used every weapon at a king's command, have torn down every faerie hill you could find, but it was not until you donned a beggar's rags, took up a harp, and returned to this tree that you had any luck. What a war band could not achieve, a pattern of notes, the sound of strings between wood, accomplished in minutes. You should have known. The lord of the Daoine Sidhe did not win your wife with a sword, he won her with a game of chess, an arm at her waist, and words in her ear. You were a fool to take the challenge of the tall, slim stranger. A fool to grant him a boon, a fool to take him to Meridys, sleeping under the tree between the worlds. He drew her to her feet, drew her to his side, and spoke the words of enchantment.

"Ah, fair Meridys, will you come with me to a land where music always plays? A land where every wish is fulfilled and there is no sin? In the Otherworld, there is no 'yours' and no 'mine', ours is the wisdom of the world before Adam. Come with me, fair one, and you will have mead and wine and laughter. We will make love for seven days and seven nights without shame, and then we will begin again."

Not a promise many women could resist, and Meridys had not.

Now you have seen her, seen the way she clings to him—was it enough?

You should probably turn around, return to your people, find a new wife and win back your rath. No one *forced* Meridys to place her palms so low on that flat belly, to cling so closely to that slender back, no one. "Enchantment" is a fine excuse, but the truth of the matter is, she left you for the King of the Sidhe. Still, something keeps you there in the pool of dappled moonshadow, a memory of days, smooth warm skin and rich laughter. A pain in your belly which could only be soothed by those white hands. The knowledge of your neglect, the neglect that made her leave.

If you do not decide soon, you will no longer be able to catch up with them, no longer be able to find the entrance to the Otherworld, never have a chance to win her back.

Was merely seeing her enough?

You know it is utter foolishness, but you plunge into the forest after them. Much that you have done since Meridys left you has been foolishness, these beggar's rags on your back. Auld on your throne, the cold heath beneath your head at night. But no pain will drive out the pain she left you with, and you cannot start over until you know she has chosen him over you, irrevocably, until you know it was more choice than enchantment. Perhaps not even then. Even if you are pursuing your pain, you need certainty, more certainty than an intimate touch spied on the edge of an orchard can give you.

The full moon turns the forest into a landscape of silver, gray, and black and you hurry through shadows of oak and ash, following glimpses of white and trails of laughter. Meridys always loved to laugh, it was said the faerie folk did as well. Perhaps that was the reason, perhaps you were too somber for her, with your ambition and your responsibilities. Perhaps you would not be doing her a favor to take her away from them.

You think you catch her laugh echoing that of the others and you hasten after it, your harp, your only weapon securely slung across your back, hidden in a satchel beneath the ragged cloak. You said you would give everything to win her back again. People laughed, but here you are in the grove of the Sidhe, nothing to your name but rags and a harp. The weapons of kingship were not enough against the power of the Otherworld, you must learn to fight in other ways.

You follow the faerie host for hours, until color returns to the forest and birds fill the air with the racket of their cries. Although the members of the Sidhe are on horseback, you have kept up with them easily enough—they were riding at a leisurely pace, not rushing, enjoying the moonlit forest and each other's company. But now their laughter can no longer be heard and there is no glimpse of white to be had. You try to maintain a path straight ahead, where you last heard an echo of voices, the jangle of a bridle, but soon you find the forest growing dense around you again, the trees closer together and the light less.

How will you find your way out again?

You turn slowly in a circle, trying to determine which direction to take, where the forest thins. There. There the light seems to seep through the trees, to touch the fallen leaves in patches. You head in that direction, but soon the forest grows thicker around you. Again and again you follow a trick of light until you are dizzy. It's no use. You sit down heavily on a bed of moss at your feet, a fern tickling your bare ankle. Your head drops into your hands and the thought occurs to you that you might never leave this forest.

Foolishness. Foolishness to care so much about a woman that you would risk everything to find her, risk everything for the chance to ask her to come back to you. This was the kind of love the bards sang about, but it did not feel uplifting, like the blend of words and notes you so love. The tears it brought were hot at the back of your throat, not sweet in the corner of your eye, the pain dull and constant.

You draw the harp out of the satchel at your feet and brush the strings with your fingers, shuddering at the beauty of the sound. This is the one thing you still take pleasure in, the one thing that will allow you to forget for a time. Meridys loved it when you played, loved to watch your long fingers on the strings and listen to your strong voice. But the duties of a king left you little time for the joys of the harp, and you played for her less and less, leaving her to her women and her garden. Foolishness.

THIS WAS THE KIND OF LOVE THE FEEL UPLIFTING, LIKE THE BLEND OF

You lean your head back against the oak behind you and close your eyes, gently plucking the strings of your harp, and your clear, fine voice lifts the pain of your soul to the trees

YOU DON'T KNOW HOW LONG YOU HAVE SAT just so, the harp in your lap and your eyes closed but when you raise your head and open your eyes, the sun is high in the sky, light filtering down through the branches above rather than slanting through the trees. You look up to feel the touch of it on your face. On a wide branch is a snowy white owl. At your movement, it spreads its great wings and flies to a tree a few yards away, settling down to stare at you impassively. Its eyes are an unnaturally light blue, like the sky on a hazy, hot summer day. When you rise from your seat on the moss and move toward it, the owl takes flight again, finding another perch a few more yards distant. Slowly, the owl leads you to where the forest begins to thin, until you emerge from the magic place into a large clearing, blinking from the unaccustomed brightness. In the middle of the clearing is a faerie hill, the home of the Old Ones. Suddenly hope comes alive once more. The owl helped you, all cannot be lost.

The door of the mound is a great stone threshold leading into the earth. You take the harp from your back and lean against a rowan tree where you have a good view of the entrance. The music spills forth from your fingers, a rhythmical dance of clear, high notes. You bend your head over the instrument, so immersed in the interplay of strings and hands that you do not notice the tall figure of the faerie lord until he is standing directly in front of you.

"You play astonishingly well for a mortal, bard."

You feign surprise and a touch of fear. "My lord—"

"Would you consider playing for us in our home? We would be greatly honored."

"I—I couldn't," you stammer. "It is said anyone who enters a faerie mound never returns."

The King of the Sidhe lets out a ringing laugh, the sound almost as high and musical as the notes from your harp. "We of the Sidhe have less power over you than you give us credit for. Our magic is the magic of our way of life. If you come with me, you have my promise I will let you return to your world. Although I don't see what you have to return to," he says, regarding your rags critically.

"This still is not enough and you hesitate."

"Come play for us and I will grant you a boon."

You look down so he won't see the light in your eyes. "I could use a boon. I will come with you."

You follow him to the door of the faerie dwelling, watching his swinging gait, envying him his tall, trim grace, the grace that won him Mendys away from you.

He leads you into a stone hallway that seems to go for ever into the bowels of the earth. Intricate carvings cover the walls, whorls and coils and circles turning in upon each other. You can already hear the sound of music and laughter, feel the bright presence of the faerie troop. Finally you emerge from the passageway into a clearing with grass more green than any you have ever seen, surrounded by trees rich with fruit. The air smells of summer, although harvest was over when you drew the faerie folk to the orchard. You pick out Meridys among the members of the Sidhe immediately, dancing with a man who looks so much like the lord at your side that you wonder for a moment if he really is the king who stole your wife. You glance at the man next to you. He is staring at Meridys with rapt attention; you were not mistaken.

And staring at the king is a beautiful woman of the Sidhe, with eyes of an unnaturally light blue, like the sky on a hazy, hot summer day.

"I have persuaded the harper to come to us," the faerie lord calls out when the dance is done, and the company applauds. You step forward, your gaze locked on your wife. She gives a slight start and her dark eyes grow wide. In your rags you do not look like the man she married, but she recognizes you. All cannot be lost. You draw your harp forward and begin a song of love and longing, a song from your soul. Your heart is in your fingers, and although the Sidhe are a gay folk, several pairs of eyes are no longer dry when you are done. The dark eyes of Meridys are shining with unshed tears, but she holds herself straight.

"Very fine, if somewhat maudlin," the faerie lord praises you.

"Thank you, my lord." You kneel before the lord of the Otherworld. "I would ask my boon now."

You address him, but you lift your eyes to the face of your wife, waiting. Meridys approaches the two of you as if in a dream. She has told you not once but many times how she loves the color of your eyes, blue as the sky at Lugnasad. The eyes of her faerie lord are green, bright green, spring grass drenched in rain. You cannot compete with him, you know that. He can offer her youth lasting centuries, while you can offer only a short brutal life filled with war and strife. But you can offer her a love defining your existence. The faerie lord has too little to risk to be able to offer her that. Perhaps if she could understand, perhaps—

You wait until she has reached your side.

"I would like to ask a question of my wife," you say, your eyes still on hers.

"You would ask, bard, but what would you offer?" she says softly. Ah, that voice, finally, that voice again. It is enough.

You smile, shake your head, look down at your rags and back at Meridys.

"As you can see, I have nothing left. Nothing but the love of a lifetime."

Her tears spill out in earnest now, and you know you have won.

BARDS SANG ABOUT, BUT IT DID NOT WORDS AND NOTES YOU SO LOVE.

THE BEAST

BY BRUCE HOLLAND ROGERS · ILLUSTRATION BY MATT TISDALE

SOME PEOPLE TELLING THE STORY say that the beast looked like a jaguar, with claws and fangs. Others say it was more like a howler monkey, shaggy and upright. Still others say it looked nothing like either of those animals, that it was brilliantly colored like a bird and that, like a bird, it sang. A few people say that the beast was plain and quiet like the capybara.

Then there's me. When I tell this story, I tell the truth. No one knows what the beast looked like. How could they know? All of this happened in the first days of the present sun, long, long ago, before the old temples were covered up by the jungle, before the old temples were even built.

A man had a beast that he had caught in a snare. He had never seen anything like it before, and he didn't know how to go about cooking it. Some animals are best roasted, but others are tough and need to be boiled. While he was deciding, he kept the beast tied to a stake outside of his hut.

It happened that the man's wife gave birth. Their baby came into the world with a flaw. Her face was mashed in. His nose and upper lip were flattened together as if some power had struck him in the womb. He could hardly breathe. No doubt he would soon die.

In his grief the man took up a branch and began to beat the beast. Blow after blow fell on the animal until it collapsed. Then the beast raised its head and spoke. It said, "Take a little of my spittle. It is medicine."

The man was surprised that the beast could speak, and even more surprised that it should offer him a gift after he had used it so cruelly. But he went and got a little pottery jar, and holding the beast by the scruff in case it tried to bite him, he collected a few drops of saliva. He went back into his hut.

"What is that?" said his wife when she saw the jar.

"It is medicine."

"Who gave it to you?"

"The beast."

"How do you know the beast's medicine is not poison?"

"The child will die anyway, as he is now," the man said. He rubbed the beast's spittle on his son's broken face. In the morning, the child was healed.

The next day, the man said to the beast, "That was very good medicine. What do you want as a reward?"

"Offer me freedom and I will take it," said the beast.

"You are far too valuable to set free. But I will keep you in comfort."

"I cannot be kept in comfort," said the beast.

The man did his best to make the beast comfortable anyway. He built a spacious pen for it. He brought it many things from the jungle to see which ones it would eat. He asked it what more he could do as a reward, but the beast said only, "Offer me freedom and I will take it."

While the man was out hunting one day, he slipped between two fallen trees and broke his leg. It took him two days to drag himself home. His leg was black and greatly swollen. He suffered.

"What shall I do?" asked the man's wife.

"Get some spittle from the beast and rub it on my leg."

She did as he asked, but the next day his leg was even more swollen. The man clawed at his own flesh in agony.

"Now what shall I do?" his wife asked.

The man tried to think. "Take a branch and beat the beast until it offers medicine."

Again, she did as he asked. This time, the spittle that the beast had given as medicine healed the man's leg. The next day, he was able to stand. "The beast must suffer to give its gift," he said. He made the pen much smaller and brought the beast only things it would eat when pained with hunger, not the things it preferred.

"Henceforth you will give medicine when we demand it."

"Yes," said the beast. "For now I am miserable."

"I would rather give you a reward," said the man.

"Give me my freedom and I will take it."

The man did not set the beast free. Whenever he or any of his family were sick or injured, they collected medicine from the poor beast and were cured. Word of the beast's medicine spread through the forest, and any time people were sick or injured they would send a relative with a little jar. The relative would also bring a gift. For the man who had captured it, the beast was his family's treasure. The man and his wife lived to an old age. After they died, his son used the beast's power to keep himself and his daughters well. He, too, lived to a very old age. When he died, the beast passed to his oldest daughter, who took it to live with her husband. They built a tiny pen for the beast, as was the custom, and fed it things it did not much care to eat. They continued the custom of sharing the beast's medicine, as well as the custom of receiving gifts.

This woman and her husband had a son. To him, the most wondrous thing about the beast was not its medicine, but that it could talk. When his parents were not around, he went to the beast and said, "Tell me what are the things you like to eat."

"I suffer even to speak of them," said the beast, "for I have not tasted them in a long time."

The boy gathered up a great many things from the forest and gave them to the beast. He noticed which foods it enjoyed most of all. Then he gathered more of those things whenever he could.

WHAT WOULD YOU PAY FOR THE HEALTH—
FOR THE LIFE—OF YOUR CHILDREN AND FAMILY?
IS THERE ANY PRICE TOO HIGH?

"Is that better?" he asked the beast.

The beast said only, "Give me my freedom and I will take it."

"My parents would make *me* suffer if I let you go."

"Only a little. I have suffered greatly for a long time."

"If I let you go, will you come back when we need medicine?"

"Give me my freedom," said the beast, "and I will take it."

Why the boy did what he did is a mystery. Once the beast was free, it might be impossible to catch again. Its medicine was a great treasure indeed. But the boy opened the beast's pen, and the beast disappeared into the jungle.

When the boy's mother and father found the pen open and the beast gone, they were furious. They looked long and hard for the beast, without success. When they were not searching for the beast, they beat the boy for his deed.

Word spread that the beast was free, and other people searched for it everywhere. Even people who lived too far away to have ever seen the beast now hunted the creature, though they often argued over what the beast looked like. How many legs did it walk upon? Were its teeth flat for grinding or sharp for piercing? Was it colorful or plain? Even people who had seen the beast disagreed. Not even the man and woman who had kept the beast could agree on every point.

The boy who had freed the beast died young of a fever.

In time, stories of the beast's appearance became more and more confused. As for the beast itself, other storytellers say it was never seen again. But how could anyone know, since people can't agree on what it looked like?

From oils to the computer, from canvas to sculpture, Daniel Horne's art is timeless.

An Artist for All CENTURIES

BY KAREN HABER

21st century

He gives subjects elan through facial expression, musculature, and body stance. In fact, you might say that Horne likes to put a "real" face on fantasy.

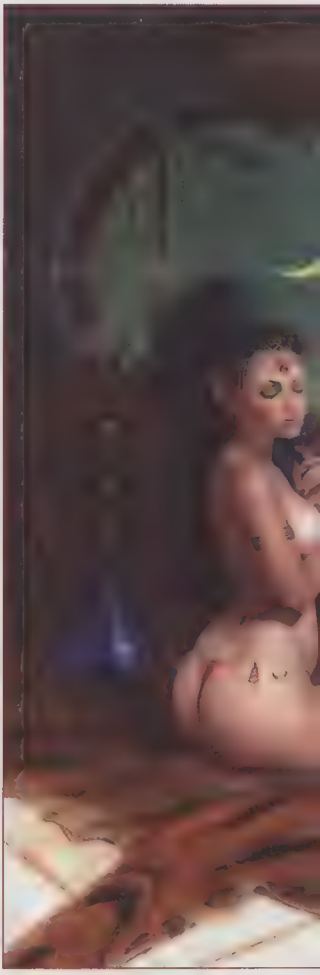
His work is informed by a lifetime of looking at faces and remembering them. "I have perfect recall when it comes to faces," the artist says. "Names, facts, no. But faces, yes."

Although he's worked with famous models—the name Fabio comes to mind—he prefers nonprofessionals: neighbors, friends, and family members. "I like skin that shows it's been lived in," he says. "I use regular people, and they bring their lives with them."

Horne has painted fantasy paperback covers for every publisher in New York, and done his share of young adult, romance, and adventure book covers as well. For many years he was the cover artist for the Hardy Boys series.

He has also illustrated several children's books and won the 1991 "Children's Choice Award" for *Young Merlin*. For the past 15 years he painted

BELOW: A portrait of Bella Lugosi and friend. RIGHT: At the heart of Horne's painting Gilded Cage, *lies the age old theme of unrequited love.*



BELOW: Classical in nature Arcadia *marked a new direction in Horne's art*

roleplaying game covers for TSR and their popular DragonLance book series. Recently he turned to sculpture.

His painting *Arcadia* graced the cover of the SPECTRUM 9 art annual. It's an example of what makes his work so popular. The sensual scene depicts a demon and nymph in a forest glade. The beautiful treatment of skin and foliage, and the thoroughly convincing depiction of the subjects creates a romantic, erotic composition that is hauntingly beautiful.

"When I got out of art school I wanted to show that fantasy could be more than cardboard characters. I wanted to show the life in their faces. I've done a lot of work with the DragonLance books—I felt that I brought a different look to them. You could read more into them."

In both his painting and sculpture, Horne puts his memory for faces to good use. He's so comfortable with depicting flesh and expression that he can easily exaggerate while maintaining emotional touchstones that resonate with the viewer. For example, as can be seen on his Web site, the in-process sculpture *Goblin Stew* is a wonderful example of exaggerated physiology—no being has ever walked this earth with those ears, that nose, those little piggish eyes—and yet this creation is utterly believable. And the skin is a map of puckers and scars that testifies to a hard-lived life.

Tech-wise, Horne moved reluctantly into the 21st century. Despite his photographic memory of faces, Horne likes to use reference photos. In the past he did all of his own darkroom work. Now digital cameras have made his life easier, as have computers.

"I'm very proud of being part of the Howard Pyle tradition, which emphasizes hand skills. So I was leery of computers. But oils are very labor-intensive and I had reached a point where I could no longer make a living as an oil painter. I had to make a choice about how to proceed

LEFT Horne's most renknou ned piece, Saving the Best for Last *BELOW. Fantasy and reality come together in Horne's cover art to* Ithanalin's Restoration *BOTTOM A likeness of Sir Ian McKellen is created for* **Gandalf Study.**

Then my wife gave me "Painter Seven" for Christmas. It's designed specifically for non-computer-savvy artists as a transition from traditional to computer media. By the middle of January, I'd completed my first cover—I didn't tell the art director I was doing digital—I wanted to see if I could fool them.

"It worked. And when I saw how darned flexible this medium is, I felt the same way I did 21 years ago when I had just entered the field and saw the beauty of doing things in a new way. Now as a seasoned artist, I can translate everything I do into it—without losing the integrity of the piece, I can change it slightly. I draw it into the computer with a stylus, hand-drawn. I love the way I can experiment as I'm working. That alone is worth the price of admission. Once I learned it's still the artist that drives the image, I became really comfortable with the computer. It's just a tool. It can't do anything by itself. You utilize all your skills."

Again, I come from a very 19th-century discipline. The hardest thing for me to learn was that I couldn't look at my hand as I worked. You separate your eye from your hand because you have to look at the computer screen."

He laments the impact of the computer on art training: "I wish that art schools today still emphasized hand skills. Too many kids are being taught computer skills only. It affects the work. There's a certain time in life when you're open and can absorb information—and if you don't take advantage of that and learn the hand skills as well as the computer skills, you really can't go back and grab those hand skills later. And it shows in the work.

"Oil painting is moving back into the realm of fine art. No commercial artist under 30 is using it. Frankly, I miss the feel of it, the smell of it, the finished product. When you finish a digital piece it's kind of anticlimactic—it's weird, because you can't touch it. I feel a little distant from the work. Perhaps my sculpture compensates.

"It was by pure accident that I got into sculpting. I picked up a package of Super Skulpy to play around with, and it was the closest I ever got to a religious experience. I took to it immediately. In fact, now I sculpt more than I paint."

He began to sculpt action figures for characters from Lord of the Rings for Middle Earth, and has created Gandalf, Frodo, Gollum, the Balrog, Ugluk, Gimli, the Nazgul, Saruman, and Boromir. For Warner toys he's designed and sculpted several figures in their Sports Warrior action figure line.

His sculptures have won him many awards, including Best 3-D Art at the 1999 Philcon, Best Fantasy in Show, Best 3-D Art in Show, and The People's Choice Award at the 2000 Philcon.

Recently Horne formed his own company, Flying Carpet Studioz, under whose title he creates sculptures for resin model kits based on his own designs, and maquettes for the film industry.

"Doll making is in my blood," Horne says. "It's a family legacy." His mother is and his grandmother was a doll maker.

"My passion really is dolls. I grew up in a house

ABOVE: A mainstay of the fantasy genre, the elf sits proudly atop his white steed in this striking piece BELOW: An unwary passerby falls for a trap in All that Glitters

ABOVE The Rover *marked Horne's second attempt to enter the world of digital painting Andy, his son, was used as a model for the halfling*

where my mother had a studio—she still teaches doll-making to this day—but I never really became a part of that But I guess it affected me subliminally."

He fabricates every part of his art dolls the hands, heads, feet, even the clothing and jewelry "It uses all the visual art forms, whether it's a miniature suit of armor, or worn-out boots It seems like a natural extension of my involvement in fantasy illustration, to take it into 3-D "

Obviously, this is one man who is good with his hands. He has fabricated armor for battle reenactments and Halloween costumes for his lucky daughter and son He understands the weight of a sword in his hands and the pressure of armor upon the body

"I used to sword fight at Renaissance Fairs before I realized I needed my fingers for other things It took me a year to make a chain mail shirt "

"When I was a kid, I wanted to do stop-motion animation, not illustration Ralph Bakshi Studios even offered to hire me to work on their Lord of the Rings film, but I was too young I'm still kind of a closet animator I do my own little films My daughter Jen is 15, one of those scary computer kids, and she's been doing editing and sound editing on her own films on the computer in my studio She did my Web site and keeps it updated And my 11 year old son, Andy, also has his own sculpting and painting area in my studio "

His own conversion to computer use hasn't dulled his affection for printed matter "I'm a book freak In my basement studio one wall is a reference library I've loved reading all my life and I often listen to poetry as I work I love mythology and ancient history, and I get a lot of inspiration from poetry The painting *Arcadia*, which was on the cover of SPECTRUM 9, came from Shakespeare and other poetry I'd read

And I still get my inspiration from the great 19th-century English and French artists. I love Waterhouse and Jerome The art of that pre-World War I world is compelling to me That lost innocence and romance "

Horne also gets inspiration from charting his own personal artistic journey. One wall of his studio is devoted to his original oil paintings "I can use my art as personal milestones—see where I've been "

Daniel Horne is a happy man He's made the transition between centuries without a whimper. "I'm fortunate to have passed through a lot of different phases in this genre—it's adapt or die, just as it always has been I'm glad that I can be flexible. I can literally turn my chair around from the easel to the computer, and then over to the sculpting table. I love it "

In a GLASS CASKET

It can be hard for a parent to let go of a much-loved child, but some parents make it much harder than others ...

BY TIM PRATT
ILLUSTRATION BY PATRICK ARRASMITH

BILLY CATES FOUND THE GLASS CASKET BEHIND THE burned-out Safeway, tucked in between the rusty dumpster and a stack of splintery wooden pallets. Billy leaned his bike against the soot-blackened brick wall and approached the casket. It was simply made, just an oblong box six feet in length, with beveled corners that reminded Billy of his dad's cut-crystal brandy decanter. Dad hadn't taken the decanter with him when he left (he hadn't taken much of anything), but Mom had smashed it in the fireplace.

The casket rested atop a board laid across two sawhorses. Billy stood at a respectful distance, looking. A girl lay inside, clothed in a red dress, white hands crossed on her stomach. Billy couldn't see the girl's face because of the sunlight glaring on the glass, so he stepped closer, sneakers scuffing on the asphalt. He wanted to see her face; he wanted to run away.

Curiosity won. Billy leaned close to the glass, his head throwing a shadow on the casket and cutting the glare so that he could see the girl's face. Her eyes were closed, which seemed only natural. Her dark red hair matched her dress, the color of cherry Kool-Aid stains on a white tablecloth. She looked about sixteen. There were girls at school prettier than her, in the higher grades—the girl in the casket didn't have much of a chin, and her hands were chubby. Her skin was beautiful, though, white and unblemished.

Billy wondered if she was dead, if this was the work of a serial killer, like in the movies—the Glass Casket Killer, something like that. If she was dead, Billy had to call 911 and tell the police. They wouldn't believe him, probably, but if they sent someone, they'd see it was true, a dead girl in a glass box. Or maybe she was a magic princess, like in that Disney movie, and she just needed a kiss from a prince to wake her. Billy wrinkled his nose. He wasn't a prince, and he didn't want to kiss her, and she was trapped in a glass box anyway.

His breath fogged the glass, obscuring the girl's face. Billy wiped the mist away, then looked at his hand in horror. Fingerprints—he'd just left fingerprints all over the glass! The police would be furious with him for sure.

Billy lowered his hand and looked back down at the girl's face.

Her cheeks were wet, and as he watched, tears ran from her closed eyes, down her face, into her hair.

Billy backed up a step. She wasn't dead after all, just trapped. Billy could think of one thing better than discovering a dead body, and that was rescuing somebody. The Glass Casket Killer liked to put women in glass boxes until they died, maybe that was it, but Billy could save her.

He looked around, then headed for a pile of broken-up cinderblocks. He picked up a heavy fragment of concrete in both hands and carried it back to the casket. He thought for a moment about tropical fish tanks, and about the boy in the bubble he'd seen in that video at school. Maybe letting air in would kill this girl, maybe the casket was sealed to protect her. Billy dropped the concrete. He didn't want to mess anything up. The fingerprints were bad enough. What sort of trouble could he get in for destroying evidence, or for killing the girl by accident?

Billy had to go home for dinner soon. Mom didn't like it when he wasn't home when she got off work, and she wouldn't like him hanging around behind the burned-out store. Ever since Dad left last year she'd been like that, yelling at him half the time, hugging him close the other half. He took a last look at the crying girl and went reluctantly to his bicycle. Maybe Mom would know what to do.

Billy pedaled home, his bike wobbling in slow arcs back and

forth across the cracked sidewalks and back streets, thinking about the glass casket, the way the beveled corners caught the afternoon light, the way the girl's tears fell into her hair His helmet hung by its chin strap from the handlebars, forgotten as usual. Billy made it home and dragged his bike through the gate into the scraggly front yard. He chained his bike to a post on the porch, and remembered to put his helmet on so his mom would think he'd been wearing it all along. He went through the front door, calling "Hey, Mom!"

His mom was there, sitting stiffly in the straight backed armchair, and a strange man sat on the couch The man nodded to Billy He wore a dark suit and had eyes as blue as Dad's poker chips With his slicked-down black hair and his little mustache, he looked like a magician, someone who'd wear a tuxedo on stage and do card tricks, and for the grand finale he'd cut a lady wearing a sequined dress in half, or stick swords through her.

"Billy, this is Mr Mancuso," his mom said. Her voice was wavery, and she looked at him funny, her eyes not quite focusing. "He used to know your father "

Billy looked at the man with new interest. "You knew my dad? Do you know where he is now?"

"I might be able to find him for you," Mr. Mancuso said His voice purred, smooth, like a radio announcer on the classical station Billy's dad had liked "I'm looking for someone, too, and I'm always willing to exchange help for help." Billy's mother didn't look at Mr Mancuso as he spoke She just stared at the blank television screen That television had never been turned off in the evening, not in Billy's experience. When Mom was home, the television was on Even when Mom had company, the most she'd do was turn the volume down low

"Children see lots of things," Mr Mancuso said, leaning forward, his blue eyes wide, his smile friendly but a little smirky, too "They go places adults don't, see things adults wouldn't notice Your mother . hasn't been much help " Mr Mancuso frowned a little, like Billy's mom had disappointed him "Neither has anyone else I've talked to today But perhaps I've been talking to the wrong people I wonder, have *you* seen the one I'm looking for?"

He's the Glass Casket Killer, Billy thought, *only somehow he's lost his casket.* Or maybe he really was a magician, and the girl in red was his lovely assistant, but the last disappearing trick went wrong somehow and he lost track of her. Those blue eyes—they were magician's eyes, for sure Billy should help Mr Mancuso He should tell him anything he needed to know.

Billy opened his mouth to say "She's behind the Safeway, sitting up on a couple of sawhorses," but then he remembered the tears. The girl in red was crying, even while sleeping, even while seeming to be dead. Was she crying because she was lost, because she wanted the magic trick to be over? Looking at Mr. Mancuso, Billy didn't think so She was crying for some other, more through-and-through reason Crying for something to do with Mr Mancuso, maybe

"I didn't see anybody," Billy said "I had detention at school and then I rode my bike home straight after I'm going to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, Mom." Billy hurried into the kitchen before Mr. Mancuso's blue eyes made him change his mind Mom would never let him have a snack so close to dinnertime, but she didn't object, and Mr. Mancuso didn't do anything more than grunt.

Billy went around the counter to the kitchen, wishing it was in a whole different room, not just sort of partitioned off from the living room A pan of spaghetti sauce bubbled on the stove, burning and spattering, and the pot of water with the noodles in it had boiled down to almost nothing. It wasn't like Mom to leave the stove unattended, even with company here. Billy trembled all over, afraid from his skin to his bones—this was worse than having to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night after watching a scary movie, because then he only *imagined* monsters Mr Mancuso was *here*

Billy turned the burners off and went to the cabinet to get the peanut butter, trying to act natural, like he had nothing to be afraid of His heart thudded like he'd just pedaled his bike up a steep hill, and he listened as closely as he could for the creak of the couch, for any sound to indicate what Mr Mancuso was doing

When Billy turned back around to get the bread, Mr. Mancuso was gone. Billy hadn't heard the door open. His mom stood up, frowned at the TV, and flipped it on with the remote She looked at Billy, opened her mouth, then closed it, shaking her head "Put that peanut butter away," she said, walking toward him "I'm fixing dinner."

Billy screwed the lid back on the jar, relieved in some way he couldn't define Everything was OK, though his mom frowned at the stove and refilled the pot with water

SHE DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING ABOUT MR MANCUSO AT dinner. Billy didn't either, though he wondered if the man could really find his dad, really bring him back Maybe he could But if Dad had left once, wouldn't he just leave again? Probably so. Billy didn't mention the girl in the casket, either. His mom was in a bad mood, smoking cigarettes one after another, not talking much. He'd learned not to bother her when she was in moods like this. She'd just yell, or worse, start crying.

Billy watched TV with his mom for a while, then did his homework, not thinking about it much, probably getting half the math problems wrong He waited for his mom to say goodnight and go to bed, then waited a while longer for the light to go off under her door, and then a little longer still for her to get good and asleep Billy had never sneaked out of the house before, and he didn't want to get caught. He covered some pillows with a blanket so if his mom came to check on him it would look like he was still in bed The pillow trick didn't look as convincing for real as it did in the movies, but maybe it was good enough in dim light Billy put a flashlight in his bookbag, then crept to the garage He opened his dad's little red toolbox and looked into it for a while, wondering what he'd need, finally deciding to take the whole thing.

Billy put the toolbox in his bookbag, wincing at the clank it made as tools bumped around inside, then he slipped out of the house, carefully locking the door behind him. He unchained his bike and rolled it into the street, glad that the playing cards he'd had clothespinned to the spokes had fallen off last week. The distinctive "click-click-click" would have probably awakened his mom He pedaled away through the empty streets toward the Safeway

The area behind the grocery store, including the glass casket, was pretty well lit by a bluish light on a pole, but the shadows up against the building were scary What if there was a homeless guy there, or a drug dealer? Or Mr Mancuso? Billy just had to hope it was safe. He parked his bike beside a pile of pallets and went to the casket

The girl inside was screaming, her mouth open wide, her head thrashing back and forth, but Billy couldn't hear anything. She pounded on the top of the casket with her pudgy fists, and lifted her knees convulsively, but the coffin didn't budge a bit, didn't rock or shift on its flimsy plywood pedestal Billy stared at her, momentarily stunned, then he pounded on the side of the casket with his own fists, and frantically checked it for seams or hinges. The girl kept screaming—she didn't seem to notice him at all. Maybe the coffin was made of one-way glass, so Billy could see inside, but she couldn't see out. Billy tried to shove the coffin over, thinking that if it fell off the sawhorses the coffin would break open and spill the girl out

The coffin wouldn't budge Trying to shove the casket over was like trying to push his house down. The girl's screams subsided, her punches against the coffin lid slowing down, finally stopping She crossed her hands over her chest. Her whole body shook, the way his Mom's did when she was crying hard but silently Then the girl's eyes closed, and she lay still

Billy didn't know what to make of this, but he had to let her out—she wasn't a tropical fish, that much was clear, she wanted out He opened his bag, took out the red toolbox, opened it, and

removed a claw hammer. He held it a little uncertainly. If he smashed the side of the casket, the whole top part might fall on top of the girl. But if he broke the top, bits of glass would shower down on her. Well, he couldn't do anything else—he had to break it somewhere. He lifted the hammer over the center of the casket lid, and brought it down as hard as he could.

The hammer bounced.

Billy stepped back, frowning. It had seemed so easy when he'd imagined it. Why didn't it work? He went back to the toolbox, rummaging through it. A protractor. A socket wrench. Needlenose pliers. A chalk line reel—his dad used to joke that it was used for drawing the lines on elf baseball fields, but Billy didn't know what it was really for. A paint-stained calculator. His fingers closed on a Phillips screwdriver—what his dad called a "starhead" screwdriver—and he smiled. His dad had taught him how to chop wood, and shown him how wedges worked. Sometimes you couldn't get a log to split just by driving the ax in. So you set a wedge, and hit the wedge with a hammer, and that split the log. A glass casket wasn't the same as a log, and a screwdriver was no wedge, but it might be close enough.

Billy set the point of the screwdriver on the beveled edge of the casket, reasoning that the glass would be thinner at that point, and easier to break. He held the screwdriver in place, lifted the hammer, and hit the end of the screwdriver handle.

The glass splintered, fine lines spreading out from the point of impact. Billy hooted with pleasure. The girl stirred a little, her white hands moving, fluttering like moths. Billy moved the screwdriver farther down the seam and repeated the process. He hummed to himself as he worked his way around the edge of the coffin, tapping his screwdriver, smiling every time at the cracking sound. He'd done one whole side and gotten halfway up the other when he looked back at the girl.

Her eyes were open, staring at him. "Can you see me?" he asked.

She nodded, once.

He held up the hammer and screwdriver. "Am I doing the right thing?"

She nodded more vigorously.

Billy went back to work. She'd thank him, and maybe there'd be a reward, and best of all she'd have a story to tell him, how she wound up in the box, what it meant, who'd trapped her and why.

BILLY HIT THE SCREWDRIVER FOR THE LAST TIME, ON the beveled edge above her head. Then he stepped back, unsure what to do next. If he tried to shove the top of the casket away, the edge would cut his hands to pieces. Maybe he could get a stick, or find some gloves, or—

The top of the casket rose up, away from the sides. At first Billy thought it was levitation, a magic trick, but then he saw the girl lifting it with her hands and her knees. She shoved the lid aside, and it fell to the ground, shattering with a sound so loud and startling that Billy dropped his hammer and screwdriver.

The girl sat up. She took a deep breath, then coughed, covering her mouth. Billy thought about the Boy in the Bubble again, and was afraid he'd done a very bad thing.

Then she laughed and said, "I haven't smelled fresh air in a long time." She croaked more than she talked, but Billy could understand her. He went to the coffin, then wrinkled his nose. The girl *reeked*.

She frowned at him. "Try getting shut inside a box for . . . well for a long time, anyway, and see how good you smell, kid."

Billy nodded, seeing the sense in that, and held out a hand to help her. She ignored his hand, stood up in the casket, then jumped out, landing on the asphalt in a crouch. She stood up, tugged down her dress, and grinned. "I got away from the old bastard again," she said. "Ha!" She looked down at Billy. "Thanks, kid. Where am I, anyway?"

Billy just blinked at her. She didn't sound like a Glass Casket Killer victim, or a magic princess, or anything. She sounded like the girls in the older grades at his school, that was all, a little snotty, like he was just a dumb kid. "How did you—"

She held up her hand in a gesture demanding silence, then lifted her nose and looked around. "Shit. He's nearby." She dug her heel into the asphalt—right on a shard of glass!—and dragged her bare foot along the ground, wincing. She left a little streak of blood on the pavement, like red crayon on black construction paper.

"What are you doing?" he said, staring at the blood.

"Making a protective circle," she said, gritting her teeth. "But it's too damned *slow*. Do you have a knife, or something?"

"Does it have to be blood?" he said, backing away. She had such beautiful white skin, and he couldn't stand to watch her tear it this way.

She paused. "No, if this was sand I could just drag a line through the dirt. The circle has to be unbroken, though, and I can't think of any way to do that here except for blood."

Billy didn't ask why she needed a circle. He knew why, though he couldn't say *how*. He knew. Maybe he'd seen it in a movie, or maybe the knowledge simply lived in him. They needed a circle to keep the bad things out.

"Wait!" he said when she started dragging her foot again. He rummaged through the toolbox and came up with the chalk line reel. "Will chalk work?"

"Perfect," she said, snatching it from his hand. She kneeled, and Billy could see the bottoms of her feet. The one she'd dragged was bloody, but the soles of both feet were covered in thin white scars, like they'd been scratched repeatedly and deeply by knives. She moved the chalk line reel slowly, drawing a ragged circle around herself, Billy, and the remains of the casket.

"What happened to your feet?" he asked when she'd finished drawing the circle.

She glanced at him, frowning. "Do you know the story of the little mermaid?"

"I saw the movie," Billy said.

"I don't know about any movie. I'm talking about the one where the mermaid is given legs so that she can walk around on land, but every step is agony, as if knives are being driven into her feet. That story."

"I don't know that story," Billy said. He looked at her feet again, fascinated. "You were a mermaid?"

She laughed. "No, kid. But my dad liked the idea, and thought making my feet hurt like that every time I left the house would be a good way to keep me from running off." She shook her head, her dark red hair swinging and obscuring part of her face. "Didn't work, though. I could ignore the pain for a while, and eventually I always found somebody to carry me."

"Your *dad* did that?" Billy couldn't imagine such a thing.

"Yeah. When that didn't work, he tried the box. He said it would keep me young and beautiful, and I guess it did, but he didn't tell me he never planned to let me out. But I'm my father's daughter, and I know tricks, too. It took a long time, but I finally managed to get away, glass box and all—"

"Caroline!" someone shouted.

Billy jumped, and the girl put a finger to her lips. "Shh," she whispered. "The circle keeps him from seeing us, but he can still hear us."

They sat very still. The voice called again. "Caroline! I know you're here."

Mr. Mancuso appeared, walking into the pool of blue-tinted brightness cast by the sodium-vapor lights. He headed straight for Billy's bike, propped against the pallets, outside the protective circle. "Oh, little boy," he called. "I know you're here. You found her, didn't you? My pretty little girl in the glass box."

Mr. Mancuso was Caroline's dad. Billy thought of her scarred feet and tried to breathe quietly.

"I knew if I followed you I'd find her," Mr. Mancuso said. "Little boys get everywhere, they see everything. Where've you gone? Come out and give her up, my boy. I'm used to young men doing

Continued on page 90

By Eric T. Baker

Big Screen stars Shrek and Van Helsing turn small screen heroes.

Readers are 94 pages into *Adventure!* the new game of 1920's style pulp-action from Swords and Sorcery Studios for the D20 system, before they they find any "rules." *Adventure!* is part of a trilogy of games set in White Wolf's *Trinity* Universe. The game's first 94 pages are taken up by a short story from comics great Warren Ellis and four chapters of background material spanning the time between the two world wars. The authors entertainingly present the background articles as reports and files created by the game's various non-player characters.

The basis of the *Trinity* universe is Telluric energy, which gives some people super physical powers and others amazing mental abilities. Players in *Adventure!* must decide if they will play highly skilled, but essentially normal humans, or if they will be one of the two enhanced character types. With this done, players can then choose a class (or classes, there is no penalty on multi-classing) such as aristocrat, entertainer, etc. Based on those two choices, the player can then choose the character's skills, feats (which includes background traits like loyal friend, well-off, hideout, etc.), and knacks, such as perfect translation, cloud mind, sex symbol, power lifter, etc.

Adventure! makes few changes in the D20 system. The most important is that there is no magic in the "official" *Trinity* universe. The designers also adjusted the armor classes and target numbers slightly to reflect the lack of day-to-day armor worn in the 1920s. The best part of this core rulebook is the detailed background of the world and the capsule write-ups of the various NPCs. The weakest part of the book is that it lacks the sort of detailed sites, plots, and weapon and gadget lists that GM's typically rely on. GM's with a lot of imagination and time will be able to create all of this on their own. Those who lack either should probably wait for the first couple of supplements to be published before starting a campaign.

Whether in video games like Shrek 2 *and* Van Helsing (below), *or the more traditional book-based RPG formats like* Adventure (right), *action/adventure is certainly the theme du jour.*

The video game version of *Van Helsing*, new from Vivendi Universal for the Xbox and Ps2, is not that different from the film. The story is the same: a mysterious demon hunter battles the classic monsters of horror, while trying to solve the riddle of his past. The boss villains are also familiar: Dracula, the Wolfman, Mr. Hyde, etc. What is new are the hordes of lesser monsters and undead that the Van Helsing character must battle through before encountering these bosses.

The designers did a good job of digitizing Hugh Jackman's face, and the actor even does the voice-over for his character. There is no full motion video in the game as there was in *Enter the Matrix*, for example, but some scenes from the movie are recreated using the game engine. For actual play, the back-

By The Sword, Inc.

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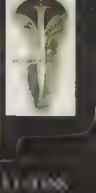

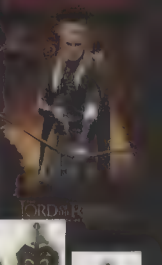

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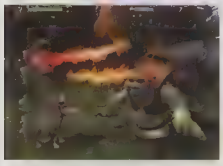

ABOVE Capturing the charm and humor of the films, Shrek 2 *should find fans of all ages RIGHT Battle classic monsters and the supernatural in* Van Helsing

grounds stay static while the player moves Van Helsing and the computer moves the monsters The camera shifts and the background changes depending on where Van Helsing is moved. It's not an ideal system, as it allows bonuses and monsters to hide in places not visible on screen, and occasionally the action takes place far enough back on the screen that it is hard to tell exactly who Van Helsing is hitting. When these things happen, it is an annoying, but not crippling flaw in the game

Combat in the game is very straightforward one button keys the melee attack, and another keys the ranged attack. Van Helsing gets different weapons and more powerful ammunition as the game progresses. An auto-targeting system means that the player doesn't really have to aim, and need only point the character in the general direction of the target The challenge of the game is finding all the hidden items, and managing to stay alert Saves only occur at certain points in the game and lots of difficult fight sequences may have to be repeated if the player loses concentration and ends up dying

Another movie tie-in game, this one for a younger audience, is *Shrek 2* by Activision for the PC, Xbox, PS2, and GC *Shrek 2* is a very different game, both in its level of challenge and its tone Like the films, *Shrek 2* tries to be entertaining for younger children while throwing in enough winks to the adults to keep them from getting bored. Unfortunately, it is hard to judge how well the designers succeeded, because players will have to be somewhat experienced with video game play to handle the game's challenges The subject matter and jokes aren't enough to keep young teenagers engaged

As in *Van Helsing*, *Shrek 2* more or less follows the plot of the film, but where *VH* mostly added puzzles and monsters, *Shrek 2* adds puzzles, monsters, and mini games The main game consists of playing a party of four characters (Shrek, Donkey, Fiona, and rotating fourth members such as Puss-in-boots) as they quest to reconcile Shrek with his in-laws. The player controls one of the party members at a time, changing as each character's particular skills are needed to solve a puzzle

None of the film's cast provided voices, but the style of the dialog is reminiscent of the film, and the visuals are very good, even if lower resolution than the big- screen version. The controls are pretty simple and reasonably forgiving, but players must have the coordination to accomplish double jumps, or they will be stranded many times in the game The combat is the least interesting part of the game, but the mini-games and puzzles proved fun While the world of Shrek is a fun backdrop to play against, in this incarnation, it is best enjoyed in small doses

La Pucelle: Tactics is a cute anime style RPG from Mastiff that Nippon Ichi Soft developed for the PS2. This is not one of the fully rendered, *Final Fantasy X*-style RPGs from Japan,whose production values give it a wide appeal. *La Pucelle* is a traditional Japanese RPG with low resolution, 2D graphics, talking head cut scenes, and turn-based combat The heroine is a young demon hunter and many of the demons she hunts look more like stuffed toys than dangerous monsters Players do not have to be major fans of this style of game to enjoy *La Pucelle*, but it certainly doesn't hurt

The truly unfortunate thing about *La Pucelle* is its repetition There are ten levels and each one requires many battles Battles increase the experience, levels and power of the characters Some battles cannot be won until the characters have achieved certain levels, which means that not only will players fight battles the first time to clear the level and advance the story, but they will fight some battles more than once simply to earn the experience needed to engage in the more difficult ones to come

La Pucelle's strong points are its story and its tone. Over the course of the game, the plot twists and turns and the characters grow and change. It is enjoyable to watch The game also never takes itself too seriously. The game isn't a comedy, but despite its demon hunting end-of-the-world" plot line, it is not dark Quite the opposite Not a game for everyone *La Pucelle* will be enjoyed by people who like a good story, can see each battle as a puzzle to solve, and who enjoy anime style humor

Switching gears, we now come to *Siren* from Sony for the PS2 *Siren* is a survival-horror game, rather than an action-horror game like *Van Helsing*, which means that the characters never meet the monsters on superior terms, and seldom even on equal ones Instead, the multiple point of view characters in *Siren* are all pretty ordinary, with the exception that each of them can "sightjack" due to the unstable nature of Hanuda the Japanese village where the game takes place

The monsters in *Siren* are called *Shibito* A failed ritual has unhinged the village in space and the *Shibito* are taking over the inhabitants Not undead, the *Shibito* are slow and also invincible Guns and heavy weapons can knock them down, but they will eventually

BELOW and RIGHT Prepare to creep silently through a quasi-medieval world, relying on stealth and trickery to achieve your goals in Thief Deadly Shadows

get back up, only to keep on coming. The key to survival for all the playable characters is to avoid being seen by the *Shibito* in the first place. Players will spend a lot of time hiding the characters behind barrels, under brush, or anywhere else the relatively small levels might allow.

Avoiding death is where the "sightjacking" comes in. The player hits a button and then scans with the left joystick, allowing himself to tune into the vision and hearing of the humans and *Shibito* near by. Once a "channel" is found, it can be assigned to a button, allowing the player to quickly switch between controlling the character and looking through the eyes of their enemies. By knowing where the monsters are looking, the player knows when and where to move the characters. This can be a slow, trial and error process.

Speaking of the need for stealth, *Thief Deadly Shadows* from Eidos Interactive and Ion Storm for the PC and Xbox, is the second sequel to the original *Thief*, the game that

started the "stealth action" genre. The difference between a game like *Thief* and one like *Siren* is that the controls of *Thief* are like a first person shooter. The character moves around in a scrolling, interactive world where action happens in real time. The camera is always looking out at eye level from a first person perspective, or at least over the shoulder, and the action is much faster, and allows a great degree of control over the character.

In *Thief*, players take the role of Garrett, a master thief living in a quasi-medieval world who makes his living seeking fortune and glory. The game is open ended and allows the player to do lots of wandering, resulting in lots of opportunities for Garrett to pilfer small coins and silver from random homes. The game does a good job of getting the player into the character's head, although generally speaking, petty theft just isn't Garrett's thing.

Garrett is slightly more combat capable than the characters in *Siren*, but stealth really is his strong point, and players will find themselves mostly attacking the game's guards and monsters when able to do so from out of the shadows, using the element of surprise. Garrett has a bag of tricks to get him through the many levels and there is a reasonably deep story relayed via notes, cut scenes, narration, and the ability to listen in on conversations. For players who prefer games of strategy to outright action, *Thief* is an excellent choice.

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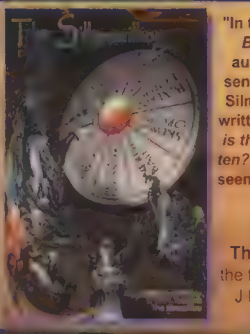

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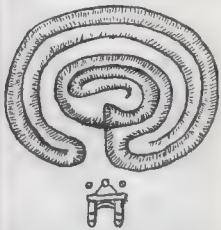
folkroots

Continued from page 24

desire Miranda, but while Ferdinand ascends from the wilds of the island (not to mention the wilds of the rapacious states of Naples and Milan) into the reputable estate of marriage Caliban repudiates the civilizing hand of Prospero and becomes increasingly more animalistic, ultimately inheriting the island that will serve him as a prison. Beyond Greenaway's cornfield rises a gathering of pyramids, related perhaps to another of the labyrinth's many



Taken from Pima baskets, these maze-like designs are Native American in origin.

aspects: the Classical insistence that labyrinths are found in Egypt, though these were not labyrinths (as we've seen) but tombs. So labyrinths become associated with the way people imagine foreign people and places by invoking the fantastic when no common explanation is acceptable. Thus, we imagine labyrinths anywhere we are faced with the incredible or the problematic.

Perhaps most memorable of all cinematic labyrinths is the goblin labyrinth in the film of the same name. With creatures and environments sprung from the mad vision of Brian Froud, the labyrinth is haunted by a thousand wizened creatures, some gifted with wisdom, some with superb comic timing, others merely with uncontrollable flatulence. A curious twist on labyrinth tales, in this film a young woman (played by Jennifer Connoly) must journey into the labyrinth to find her baby brother (an Oscar-worthy performance by Toby Froud) who has been stolen by the goblin king, David Bowie. As it turns out, the baby is not the only thing she must retrieve from the maze, and so after many harrowing adventures, she returns home, brother in arms, having learned (1) that maturity is not such a bad thing and that (2) it is very naughty to chase after rock stars even if they can do nifty juggling tricks with their crystal balls.

Numerous modern writers have taken a turn on the labyrinth's path. In her Mythopoeic Award winning novel *The*

Innamorati, Midori Snyder assembles a rich cast of characters (artists, actors, merchants, soldiers, prostitutes, thieves, and priests) in a marvelously imagined landscape inspired by Renaissance Italy. Their stories come together in the maze that lies at the heart of this ribald, enchanted tale. *Walking the Labyrinth* by Lisa Goldstein has her main character, Molly Travers, working in San Francisco when she learns that she is descended from a 19th-century vaudeville and magic troupe. Further revelations include a relationship with an arcane Order of the Labyrinth. *The King Must Die* by Mary Renault is a well-informed and creative adaptation of the Theseus myth that includes Minoan Bull Leaping. In *The Maze* by Monica Hughes, a young girl is given a curious box adorned with a maze that leads to otherworldly adventures. Although not technically a labyrinth, no one who's read Stephen King's *The Shining* is likely to forget the maze in which the monster is the one who gets lost.

The most deft of the writers to enter the labyrinth in the last hundred years is certainly Jorge Luis Borges, who wrote several short tales about labyrinths. The most intriguing among them is the hieroglyphic mystery "Ibn-Hakam al-Bokhari, Murdered in His Labyrinth" and the related tale "The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths." While not mentioning labyrinths explicitly, many of Borges's other stories contain labrynthine imagery or associations. These include "The Circular Ruins" and "The Library of Babel."

Ironically, one of the tales I like best about the nature of labyrinths is not about a labyrinth at all. "Story From Bear Country" (based on Laguna tradition) was written by Leslie Marmon Silko and is about a child who wanders away from his family, away from civilization, and into the animal realm. There the lost child meets the Bear People and becomes a bear himself. But back home, his family is longing for him, so they send the Bear Priests "loping" after him. "Naked legs painted black/ bear claw necklaces/ rattling against, their capes of blue spruce." To bring the child back to his own world, the Bear Priests must imitate bears, and walk the child back along the same path he took before, to the very spot where he first looked down and "found only bear prints in the sand where [his] feet had been." Only by walking the same road out of the Otherworld can the child return to his own people, though once resuming human form, the child always retains a portion of "Bearness." (Silko: 205) The story addresses "you." "Don't be afraid, we love you, we've been calling you all this time." We realize at the end that we, the reader, are the Bear Child, lost, wandering, in need of help to find our path and remember our name. At the center of Silko's story, *we* are transformed back into ourselves, wiser now of the nature of the world, ready, like Shakespeare's Prospero, like Theseus, like the Bear Child, to go home. ❧

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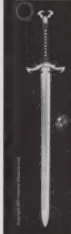

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in a glass casket

Continued from page 83

foolish things for my Caroline, but you're a little younger than most." He laughed. "She's a bad girl, Billy, always running off, abandoning her old man. You can understand how much that hurts, can't you? Your father left *you*. Nothing hurts worse than being left behind. I'm offering a straight trade, boy. You give me Caroline, and I'll give you back your father. I know you're afraid he'd just run off again if he came back … but I can make it so he won't. I can make him *want* to stay."

Billy believed him, and part of him wanted to shout, to scuff away the chalk circle with his foot and let Mr. Mancuso in. Because he loved his dad, and he wanted him back. Mr. Mancuso was right. Nothing hurt like being abandoned.

Billy turned his head. Caroline stared at him, her eyes wide. She crouched perfectly still, watching to see what he would do. Billy thought about opening his mouth. He could scream before she stopped him, and then he'd get his dad back. His mother would be happy, and she wouldn't yell at him so much, and she would let him go and play with his friends.

But Billy remembered Caroline's tears, when she was inside the box. No matter how tough she seemed now, she'd been crying before. And her feet … if something like that, some spell, was the only way to make Billy's dad stay home, it was better to let him stay away.

Maybe some things did hurt worse than being abandoned.

Mr. Mancuso touched the bike's handlebars, then sniffed his fingers. He walked toward the coffin, frowning, squinting.

He stopped on the edge of the circle. "Now what's this?" he said. He waved his hands in front of him, frowning. "Something's amiss."

Caroline grabbed Billy's arm, her fingernails digging into his skin. She looked at her father, who was muttering and moving his hands in strange patterns and chuckling to himself.

Billy looked around. The far edge of the circle went right up to the wall of the Safeway. There was a hole in the bricks there, a small opening half-hidden by a broken pallet. Billy pointed toward the hole. Caroline frowned. Billy gestured more vigorously, a shooing-in motion. She shook her head.

Trust me, Billy mouthed. Caroline scowled, then nodded. She moved laboriously away on hands and knees, carefully avoiding the fragments of the casket lid. Billy got up and tiptoed to the casket. When Caroline reached the edge of circle, near the dark hole, Billy put his hands on the casket and shoved as hard as he could.

It didn't resist him this time. The glass box slid off the pallet and smashed on the asphalt, shattering just like Dad's brandy decanter had when Mom hurled it into the fireplace. Caroline scurried into the hole, the noise of her escape covered by the splintering of glass. Fragments of the coffin cascaded over the chalk line, breaking whatever charm had hidden Billy before.

Mr. Mancuso blinked at him, then stepped on the broken glass. "Where is she?"

Billy did his best to look like a scared kid. It wasn't hard. He whimpered and backed away. "I don't know. I broke open the coffin, and let her out, and then she drew this circle around me and told me that if I stepped outside it her dad would catch me, and put me in a glass box until I ran out of air and died."

"Why did you shove the coffin over?" His hands moved slowly, sinuously, as if independent of the rest of his body.

Billy shrank away. "You came so close, I was sure you'd find me. I was afraid you'd put me inside the box, so I broke it. I was afraid you'd put the lid back on and seal me up."

"That's just what I should do, too," he said. "Why didn't you do as I asked? Why didn't you take me to her? I would have given you your father back."

"I know," Billy said, and when he cried, the tears were real. He rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. "I know, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Mr. Mancuso kicked the fragments of the coffin. "I should punish you, little boy. I should tie you to your mother forever, make it so you vomit blood if you're ever out of her sight. Does that sound nice?" He grinned, and the snake-dance of his hands sped up. "You don't have the will my Caroline does, you'd never manage to break that bond. And when your mother dies—because all of you always die—you'll have to lay atop her grave just to stay alive. Yes. I'd make you a devoted son."

Billy closed his eyes and whimpered.

"Bastard," Caroline said. "Leave him alone."

Billy's eyes snapped open. Mr. Mancuso whirled around. Caroline was standing outside the circle. She must have crawled through the dark, charred inside of the grocery store and come out another hole in the wall. She held a large triangular shard of glass, from the coffin or just from the general wreckage around the store, Billy didn't know. She put the point of the glass against her throat. "Let the kid go, Dad, or I'm *really* going to leave you forever."

"You wouldn't," Mr. Mancuso said.

"You know I would."

Mr. Mancuso looked at Billy, then spat. "Fine. Come back to me, and I'll let the boy go."

"No negotiation, no compromise. Let him go now, or I'll cut my throat."

"If you kill yourself, I'll do anything to the boy I want." His hands were moving slowly again, hypnotically, but Caroline didn't look at them.

"You won't let me kill myself, though. Then you wouldn't have anything left."

Mr. Mancuso's hands stopped moving, and then he slumped. He suddenly looked very old. "Go on, then," he said, flapping a hand at Billy.

"I want your blood on it, Dad. That you won't harm him or anyone he loves."

Mr. Mancuso frowned. "Are you trying to trick me? You think he loves *you*, that you'll be protected?"

Billy looked at her, startled.

"He might love me a little, for coming back just now, but that's not what I mean. I mean his mother, and his father, wherever he is. You never try to hurt me, anyway, do you Daddy? You just try to keep me safe." She spat the last word, and pressed the glass closer to her throat, until a spot of blood welled.

"Fine!" Mancuso shouted. He held a long, shining blade in his hand, a slender silvery knife that had appeared as if by magic, but without sparkles or fanfare. Mr. Mancuso cut his palm and made a fist, dripping blood onto the asphalt. The blood hissed and smoked where it touched the ground, and Billy backed away, afraid it would spatter on his shoes. "I will not harm this boy or any he loves."

"Go on, Billy," Caroline said, lowering the shard of glass.

"But what will happen to you?" Billy said. "What about—"

"Don't worry about me," she said. "You let me out of the coffin. I'm better off now than I was before. I might get away clean this time."

"You're mine," Mr. Mancuso said. "You're my blood, and you will not leave me."

"Get on your bike and go, Billy," Caroline said. She sounded very tired, as tired as Billy's mom often did.

Billy took his bike and pedaled away, not looking back, crying as he rode, the wind blowing his tears away.

Once he got home, Billy crept into the house, only to find his mother lying on his bed with the lights on, clutching his pillow.

"Mom?" he said.

"Billy?" she said, sitting up, still holding the pillow. Her hair was mussed, her eyes red from crying. "I thought you ran away." She shivered, and stopped speaking, and sobbed, soundlessly, shaking.

Billy dropped his bag and got into bed with her. He held his mother in his arms and cried with her. "No, Mom, I won't run away, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

"Never leave me, Billy," she said, her voice muffled against him. "Just stay with me, don't go, never ever go away."

Never? Billy thought. *Never ever?*

He held his mother close.

He said "Shh." ❧

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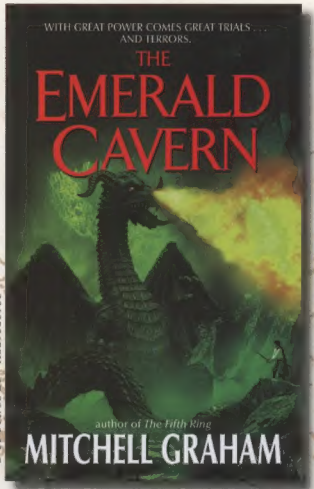

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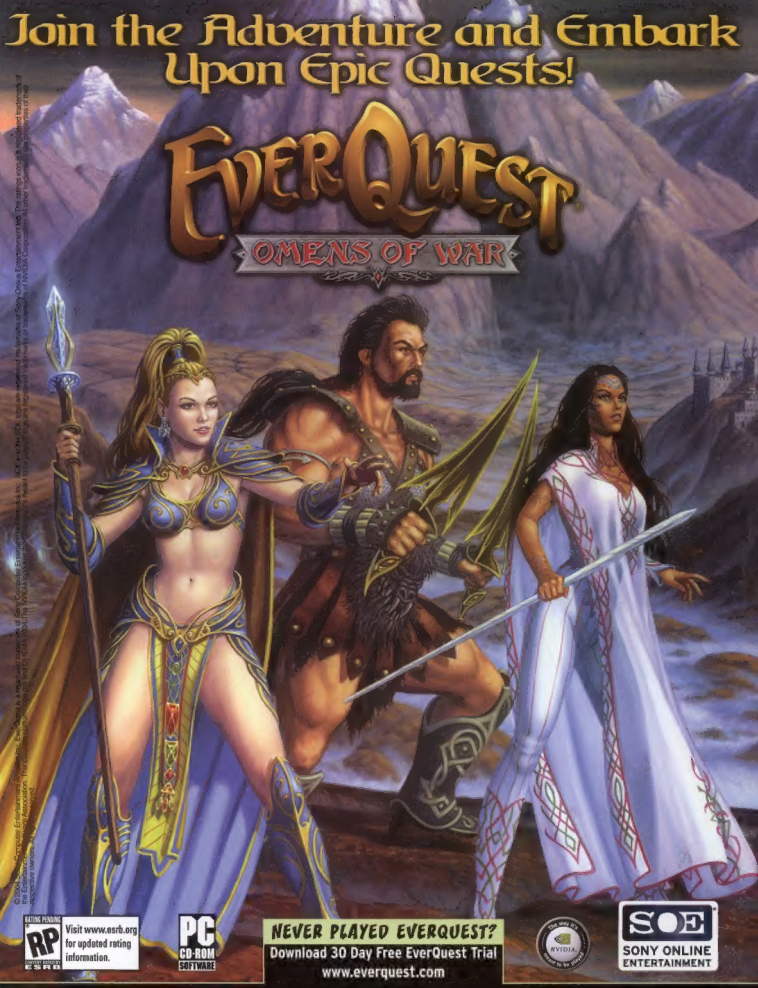
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